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NOVEL

43

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Seven Seas Entertainment

HEIMIN NO KUSE NI NAMAIKINA! 3 © INORI. 2023

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PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar
VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold
PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 979-8-88843-432-1 Printed in Canada

First Printing: October 2024 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Chapter 7: Dependable Rae and Me

You must be joking!" My shout shook the room.

It was already late in the evening. We were in my dorm room at the Royal Academy. Ralaire cowered back on the desk, trying to make herself small.

After being freed from prison, Rae gave me some unbelievable news. First off, she was no longer a student of the Academy but had been appointed to the Secret Service, reporting directly to King l'Ausseil. Lilly and I were to aid her. Though surprising, this made sense. I even felt a little proud of her—a commoner—for rising above her station. But I was galled to find out she was tasked with investigating nobles for corruption, including my own father.

"My father, corrupt?! You must be out of your mind!" My father was the very embodiment of a perfect Bauer noble. He had dedicated his life to serving the kingdom as its Minister of Finance. I would not stand to hear his name sullied.

"Now, now, the king just has some doubts. Nothing is set in stone yet," Rae said. But I did not believe King l'Ausseil to be thekind of man to act on mere doubts. He had to have some basis for suspecting my father.

"The fact that His Majesty would doubt my father at all makes me doubt *His Majesty's* sanity! Has the François family not always protected the kingdom's treasury with the utmost honor?!"

Ever since my vacation with Rae, I'd come to question the edifice of the nobility as a whole. I'd even done some investigating of my own and learned of some nobles who were likely corrupt. But my father could never be one such person... Right?

"M-Miss Claire, this might actually be a valuable opportunity." Lilly, who looked terrified of me, spoke up all the same. She had just happened to come by my room before Rae returned to make her report.

"I-I also don't want to believe my father is doing something corrupt. That's why I think we should take this chance to prove our fathers' innocence."

Lilly was being optimistic about this, and rightfully so, as she had a point. But it was harder to prove the *absence* of guilt than it was to prove guilt. Investigating our fathers and procuring nothing to prove their innocence could ruin their standing and result in them being wrongfully punished.

"Wh-what sort of corruption are our fathers suspected of?" Lilly asked.

"I don't know yet," Rae answered. "His Majesty told me to speak to Rod."

"Then let's go see him already," I said. I was eager to learn what manner of hogwash my father was suspected of.

"Not today; it's already dark out. I'm sure you'll both receive official instructions from the king tomorrow, so let's wait until then."

"...How vexing," I said. Rae was staying calm to balance out my loss of composure, it seemed. Or perhaps she was just always this calm. "And why have you dragged Cardinal Lilly into this, anyway?"

"Well, I thought that since we have to investigate Master Salas, we could use Miss Lilly's help—"

"You really don't understand how dangerous this is, do you? Prying into the affairs of powerful people will make us equally powerful enemies."

Investigating lesser nobles was dangerous enough, but my father and Salas were some of the highest-ranking nobles out there. If, by some minuscule chance, we found evidence of wrongdoing, it wasn't out of the question that they might do unthinkable things to keep our mouths shut.

"I-I can use water magic. I'm sure I can help," Lilly said.

"It's not a question of whether you can help; it's a matter of safety. Rae is only fine because she has me protecting her." I had high aptitude in fire magic. It would take a lot to get through me.

"B-but I'm worried!" Lilly said.

"You have nothing to fear. All these suspicions will prove unfounded," I replied.

"I-I don't know what Miss Claire will do to Rae if you two are alone!"

"That's what you're worried about?!" And if anything, shouldn't it be what Rae would do to me?!

"Huh? Are you going to do something to me, Miss Claire?" Rae asked.

"I am not!"

"Why not?!"

"Because why would I?!"

"Y-you don't want to do anything to Rae?!" Lilly stammered. "Have you taken leave of your senses?!"

"Ugh, you exhaust me! Both of you!"

It had been a while since we'd had such nonsensical banter. We'd been busy lately, after all. Ralaire, sensing the mood had lightened, seemed to grow cheerful once more.

"I suppose it can't be helped," I said. "I consent to Cardinal Lilly joining us, but please, be extremely careful."

"Y-yes, of course," said Lilly.

"You too, Rae."

"Yes, ma'am."

And that was where we decided to call it a night.

The next day, we visited Rod in the Royal Palace first thing after classes.

"Oh, there you are."

Rod's room, as befitted a member of the royal family, was spacious and filled with tasteful, expensive furnishings in warm colors. My own room was nothing to scoff at, but it certainly wasn't as grand as a prince's. Lilly—having led a humble life at the church—seemed uncomfortable in the lavish room. Rae, on the other hand, appeared rather unimpressed.

"I don't care for small talk, so let's get right to the point. Salas and Dole are

embezzling," Rod said with certainty. He always spoke with utter confidence, but this particular matter was something I simply couldn't agree with him on.

"Master Rod, you say this because you have definitive evidence, correct?" Remembering Catherine's advice from the previous night, I questioned Rod calmly.

"Nope. I've got nothing of the sort."

"N-nothing?" Lilly said in disbelief. I felt the same way. On what basis were they suspecting our fathers if they had no evidence of wrongdoing?

"Well, kind of. I don't have any *definitive* evidence. But I do have loads of circumstantial evidence," Rod said, showing us documents with his findings so far. "Salas and Dole are both smart. They haven't left a paper trail, and their underlings are the ones doing all the actual dirty work."

The records showed that a significant amount of money tended to disappear around the two. The names of some nobles found to be involved were included, but there was nothing pointing directly at Salas or my father.

"Can't you simply arrest the nobles named?" I said. Even now, I still believed my father was innocent.

"They may be the ones getting their hands dirty, but they're not the masterminds. It'd be like cutting off a lizard's tail—it'd just grow back," Rod explained, "We learned that the hard way. Took in a batch, but more just popped up in their place." He looked at Rae with a hint of a challenge in his gaze. "So, what's the plan?"

"As I discussed with His Majesty, I'll start with the underlings you mentioned. May I have a copy of these materials?"

"I figured you would want some, so I had one made. Here." He rang a bell on the table, and a servant walked in carrying some papers.

Rae took the papers, then turned to leave the room. "If you have no further business, we will be going now."

"Hold on, Rae Taylor," Rod said, using Rae's full name for some reason.

She looked back at him with a grimace. "...Yes?"

He hesitated, something uncharacteristic of him. "Oh, nothing. Just, well... there's something I want to ask you while I have you here."

"I'd rather you not. Rain check?"

"What? C'mon, it won't take long."

"I'm sorry, but I'd very much like to leave right this instant."

"You can leave when I'm done with you," he said. "Rae Taylor...would you do me the honor of marrying me?"

Lilly, Rae, and I were all left frozen by the sheer absurdity of what he'd just said. Had Rod Bauer just *proposed*? To a *commoner*, of all people?

I fought to recover my senses, then politely questioned Rod. "Have you *gone mad*, Master Rod?!"

...Now that I think about it, the inquiry might have been less polite than I would have liked.

"A-are you suggesting a commoner marry into the royal family?!" Lilly asked.

"I am," Rod answered coolly.

What did Rae make of this? I looked over to see her deep in thought, face serious for once. I didn't blame her. A member of the royal family had just proposed to her. It would be strange for her to *not* be bewildered.

After some pondering, she said, "Just to confirm, this isn't some kind of joke?" "No. I'm serious."

"You're kidding me... Just what is it you like about me?"

"Your personality and...well, I guess how capable you are. I've actually had my eye on you from the start," Rod said. He looked like he was enjoying himself.

In contrast, Rae wore a complicated, unreadable expression. "I doubt I've done anything worth your attention."

"Are you kidding me? You've done so many crazy things. You prevented an attack on the Academy, cured Thane when he was poisoned, saved the

Aurousseaus from execution, pulled a fast one on Manaria, and got rid of that ghost ship in Euclid."

He listed all of Rae's accomplishments with great accuracy. There was no doubting Rae was exceptionally skilled. Perhaps it was no surprise Rod wanted her, given that he cared more about how talented and amusing someone was than their social background. But he couldn't have Rae. Because Rae belonged to...

"I'm sorry, but almost all of those accomplishments belong to Miss Claire," Rae said.

"Is that true, Claire?" Rod asked me.

Hearing my name pulled me back to my senses. I suddenly became aware of how flustered I was—which only made me more flustered—but I managed to compose myself and reply, "Not at all. Everything was made possible through Rae's efforts."

It was true that many of the things Rod listed couldn't have been achieved by her alone—but just as true that *none* of those things could have been achieved without her. Much as it chagrined me to admit it, her accomplishments were rightfully hers and should be recognized as such—even if that meant she would leave my side.

"I see. Well, what really decided things for me was what happened with Yu," Rod said. "You resolved a complex problem the palace had been wrestling with for years."

"But that accomplishment isn't mine alone," Rae said.

"Don't be modest. I know full well you masterminded things."

Rod was right. If it weren't for Rae, Yu would have had no choice but to continue living her life as a man against her will.

"I need someone like you at my side, not a dull noble lady who grew up coddled by a rich family," Rod concluded. "So, how about it? Wanna marry me?" He took a teasing tone, but his eyes were serious. His proposal was genuine.

"Yeah, no. Obviously, I decline."

"Wha—Rae?!" I was astounded. I hadn't thought for a moment that she might turn him down. No commoner had ever risen to become royalty before. This was an unparalleled honor. Her parents would surely be thrilled. How could she say no? "Do you have any idea what you're refusing?!"

"I believe so. He proposed to me, right?"

"You could become the queen!"

"Yeaaah, but I don't want to become the queen." She spoke with her usual indifference, like she had merely refused a request to help with someone's schoolwork.

What is with this girl?!

"But it would be an honor beyond your wildest dreams!" I exclaimed.

"Nah, it wouldn't be an honor for me."

"Why?!"

"Because I like you, Miss Claire."

What utter nonsense. I understood well enough she had feelings for me, but marriage and love were two completely separate things. Marriage was a union of two households. Personal interests had no place in the matter.

"Ha ha ha! That's right! I should've known that's what you'd say!" Rod slammed the desk, laughing. "Claire, it seems Rae values being with you over marrying royalty."

He looked thoroughly entertained, despite having his marriage proposal declined. I paled and tried to walk things back before Rae's opportunity was gone for good. "Please forgive her insolence. She's just confused by the suddenness of it all. I am sure that once she's calmed down and thought things through, she will see things differently."

"No, I'm perfectly calm—"

"I beg you, be silent for just one moment," I interrupted. Rae genuinely hadn't a single clue how important this was. This wasn't remotely similar to two

commoners marrying out of love. If it ever got out that she'd rejected a prince, the myriad nobles who were trying to marry their daughters into the royal family would throw a fit. She was basically painting a target on her back. Even if Rod himself wasn't offended, others would consider her refusal a blatant insult to the royal family.

As wise as he was, Rod was likely ready to suppress such sentiments, but he couldn't do anything to prevent people covertly making moves—or even assassination attempts on her! Rae's best option was to accept Rod's proposal and be under his direct protection.

I asked, "Master Rod, please do not withdraw your proposal just yet."

"Of course. No matter what Rae thinks, my feelings won't change."

"Thank you very much. Please, let's continue this another time."

"Sure thing."

"It's time to go! Rae, Cardinal Lilly." I grabbed Rae and Lilly and pulled them out of Rod's room.

"Wha, hey, Miss Claire!" Rae looked at me like she had something to say, but I shut her up with a glare.

I didn't speak again until we'd bid Lilly farewell and were taking the carriage home.

"Rae... You took your joke too far," I sternly chided.

"What joke?"

"You know what joke! I'm talking about how you turned down Master Rod's proposal!" My words came out inadvertently harsh as my frustration mounted.

"But I mean...come on. I can't marry someone I'm not interested in."

"Marriage is about more than *your* interests! If you were to marry into the royal family, imagine how happy it would make your parents..."

If she married into royalty, her parents would receive a dowry—and likely even more money, under other pretexts. But even setting money aside, the sheer honor of their daughter becoming royalty should be reason enough. They

would be the proudest parents in the world.

"I can't say for certain, but I think my parents would respect my decision," Rae said nonchalantly. But that wasn't the issue. She really just didn't understand a thing.

"I'm sure they would. Your parents are wonderful. But are you content to let them spoil you so? Don't you want to make them happy?"

"Well..."

Rae wasn't thinking about what marriage truly entailed, in the broad sense. She wasn't the only one being affected here. By rejecting a proposal from a prince, she might as well be saying she did not wish for her parents' happiness.

"But, Miss Claire...I only want to marry you." I could tell she was being genuine. Part of me reeled at her declaration, but I fought to keep my calm.

"Rae, listen carefully." I made my tone firm to drive my point home. "I understand you are in love with me. I think it wonderful, even. But marriage is about more than just love."

"It's not."

"It is. Love may be indulged to a certain degree, but individual desires are irrelevant to marriage."

"Miss Claire..."

"You *must* accept Rod's proposal. Being married would not obligate you to break ties with me. On the contrary, if you were to become royalty, our relationship might even—"

"Miss Claire!" Rae raised her voice, making me stop short. This might have been the first time she'd ever interrupted me in such a way. "To me, marriage is just as—no, even more—intimate than love."

"Rae..."

"No matter what you say, I have no intention of marrying anyone other than you."

As she said those words, looking directly into my eyes, I allowed myself to

imagine what life with her would be like for a moment. The two of us would live on our own. Occasionally Catherine, Misha, and Lene would pay us a visit. We'd go shopping with Pepi and Loretta, and Lilly would show up every so often to poke her nose in our affairs. I would reluctantly tolerate her, even allow her to be Rae's lover on the side, and...wait, no. What was I thinking?

Did I really think things could turn out that conveniently? I couldn't avert my gaze from reality.

My values and Rae's differed greatly. Marriage had proved to be a more personal matter for commoners than I expected—I would concede that much. But I was sure, given enough time and the proper scrutiny, that she would eventually come to see my perspective was correct.

"Rae, think about it carefully. We're both women. We can never marry one another."

"Then I will never marry. Simple as that."

"Even if I marry someone else?"

"...Even if you marry someone else."

I was a lady of House François. No matter how I felt about Rae, I would one day enter into a political marriage with another high-ranking noble. I didn't think that strange or unreasonable—it was simply what marriage existed to do. Rae said she was fine with that, and yet she had no interest in marrying royalty.

"I thought I was finally starting to understand you," I said.

"Thank you very much."

"But now, I realize how much I truly don't."

I saw her flinch in pain at my words. Those words hurt me too.

"What happened then? Did you make up with Rae?"

"Well...in a way."

It was the night of the day we paid a visit to the Thompson estate. Rae went back to her room upon our return to the Academy, while I went to mine and

chatted with Catherine before bed. Catherine was already under the blankets, but I, not quite ready for bed yet, sat in front of the dresser.

"Perhaps it'd be more accurate to say we tabled the issue instead of making up..." I said. In the end, Rae and I had shelved the marriage discussion for the moment.

"I don't see anything wrong with that," Catherine said with her usual sleepy drawl. "Some things can only be fixed with time. Oh, could you grab me a candy?"

"There you go acting wise again... Make sure you brush your teeth later, okay?"

"Okaaay."



I reached into the candy pot on Catherine's desk and took out a piece, something I was long used to doing by now. "You've gone through these quite quickly. There are only three left."

"I can't help it, they're too yummy. I thought I took my time savoring them, though."

I handed her the piece of candy, which she received with a brimming smile before tossing it into her mouth. I then climbed into my own bed.

"I'm sure things will be fine between you and Rae," she said.

"...Really?"

"Really. So let's just put that issue aside for now. How'd investigating corrupt nobles go?"

"...About as you'd expect. Baron Thompson was guilty."

Rae had looked through House Thompson's ledger and found a number of inconsistencies when she compared it against the documents Rod provided. Thompson wound up admitting his guilt. Rae offered him a plea bargain in exchange for information, and we learned of House Yale's involvement. I'd been positively taken aback to see Rae being so cutthroat. She did do a strange impression of a character from some story named "Mito Komon" that I'd never heard of, but she ended up explaining herself afterward... Though in retrospect, I found myself wondering what that had all been about.

"Oh, I see, I see. And then?" Catherine urged.

"And then nothing. That's it."

"Oh, Claire... How long do you think we've known each other? I can tell when you're trying to hide something from me."

"...Hmph."

"What else happened?"

"We...learned some disturbing news." I'd originally intended to tell her the moment I returned but, the news being what it was, had hesitated until now. "The documents we confiscated from Baron Thompson included a passage

regarding House Achard."

"I...see. What'd it say?" Her tone remained the same, but there was a slight tremble to it.

I hesitated to continue. But it had to be said. She was a noble; it was her duty to know her family's wrongdoings. "Catherine... We have reason to believe Marquess Achard is running a human trafficking ring with Baron Barlier."

No reply came from the bed above mine, only a heavy silence.

What Baron Thompson had was a letter from Patrice Barlier, Pepi's father, asking that they reduce the volume of their trafficking. There was mention of Kristoff supporting the decision. Of course, this alone wouldn't be enough to incriminate Clément, Catherine's father. He could easily just hang Patrice out to dry and slither away scot-free. But there was no denying that there was a significant amount of circumstantial evidence.

"Will my father be...arrested?" Catherine asked.

"Human trafficking is a grave crime. He must be punished. I'll...see to it that he is punished."

"...I see."

I heard her roll over in her bed.

"Catherine, did you know?" I felt ashamed to even ask such a question.

"No, not at all. But my brother Kristoff knew, huh? It seems only I was left out."

"You have my sympathies."

"Thank you."

There was nothing I could say to offer any real encouragement. Not given her family circumstances.

"I'll try my hardest to have your punishment reduced as much as possible," I said.

"Nah. It's fine."

"It's not fine! You haven't done anything wrong!"

"Well...I wouldn't say that," she said in a sudden, self-deprecating tone.

"...Catherine?" Worried, I got off my bed and climbed up to look at her. She had her back turned to me, though, so I couldn't see her face. "Don't tell me you had a hand in the human trafficking after all?"

"No, no. I'm not involved in that. But...I may have done something worse, in a certain sense."

"...Like what?" I questioned. She rolled back over, showing me a face that bore no resemblance to her usual nonchalant mien. "...Catherine, you look awful."

"Aha ha ha. I had a feeling."

"You're as pale as a sheet."

"Hey, Claire?" Her tone was as light as ever, but it was clear she was forcing herself. Her face was pale, and her gaze wandered restlessly. What could have made her so unsettled?

"Yes, Catherine?"

"Do you have anything you wish you could go back in time and redo?"

"...Where'd that come from?" I questioned her intent.

"Come on, just tell me."

"...Of course I do. Many things."

"What do you wish you could redo the most?"

"Hmph. I'd rather you not ask questions you already know the answer to, Catherine."

"Right... So it's that after all."

The fact that my mother passed away before I could make up with her haunted me more than anything.

Catherine said, "You know, there's something I wish I could redo as well."

"What's that, then?"

"It's a secret for now. I'll tell you one of these days."

"...Is that so?" Why had she brought this up now of all times? What guilt was she carrying with her, and what was it she so wanted to redo?

"It looks like it's time for my father, my brother...and I to be held accountable for what we've done."

"Catherine..."

"Don't hold back in your investigation, Claire. And don't bother trying to get me a reduced sentence either. Just see to it that justice is served."

"...All right." I could do nothing but nod along to what she asked. She looked tormented with grief. I felt as though she would crumble before my very eyes if I answered differently at all. She and I had known each other long enough to be as close as sisters, and yet I'd never seen this side of her before.

I wasn't being entirely truthful, however. She'd asked me to forget about trying to help her, and though I said I would, that was something I could never ever do.

"Thaaanks, Claire." She rolled back over and began to breathe softly, as though asleep. She seemed back to her usual self, sleepy drawl and all.

I returned to my bed and began to think. Everyone had a secret or two they wanted to keep, but it was clear Catherine's secret was something a bit graver than most.

"Hey, Catherine?" I said. No response came. Perhaps she had fallen asleep. I continued regardless. "I don't know what burden it is that you carry, but is it not a burden I can help you shoulder?" Again, no response. Only the soft sound of breathing. "Happiness shared is doubled, and burdens are halved when shouldered together. That's something Rae told me. Won't you let me shoulder your burdens with you?" Still no response. It seemed she was fully asleep. I felt drowsiness gradually take hold of me as well. "Catherine...I think of you...as...a real sister..."

I felt my consciousness slowly fade. As I slid into sleep, I did not hear her next words.

"I'll let Rae be the one to take my place. I...have no right to stay with you."

Rae and I were at the palace, in an office provided to us for the investigation. Along the wall and blackboard were scattered a number of documents, which I stared at while reflecting on recent news. Rumors regarding Thane's parentage were spreading, as well as rumors of an impending Mt. Sassal eruption. Our investigation into corruption among the nobility was proceeding well, despite all that...or at least it had been.

We'd found more than twenty nobles complicit in crimes by this point, and we finally made our way up the chain until we were implicating middle-and high-ranking nobles. But the higher we went, the craftier the culprits became at hiding their involvement. We'd found solid evidence on just about everyone, save two critical people: Salas and my father. Marquess Clément Achard, on the other hand, was plentifully incriminated, with proof to boot.

To think it would be this scandalous... I stroked Ralaire's head as I organized my thoughts. There were about ten nobles involved in Clément's trafficking ring. Among them were people of House Barlier, Pepi's family. We already had enough evidence to implicate most of them—we just needed some solid proof of Clément's involvement so we could have them all rounded up in one fell swoop.

"What's the plan, Miss Claire? Personally, I feel like we have enough circumstantial evidence to corner him as is," Rae said from next to me.

I shook my head. "No, it's not enough. If we don't guarantee Marquess Achard is arrested as well, he'll just shift the blame and rebuild."

"B-but it'll be difficult to find any more evidence than we already have," Lilly said. She was right. We'd already scoured the financial records Rod provided, the testimonies and letters received from our plea bargain negotiations, financial statements, and a plethora of other evidence. There wasn't much left to be found. If we were to progress, we needed to take a risk.

"Let's visit House Barlier," I suggested.

"H-huh?"

"That's Lady Pepi's household, right?" Rae chimed in. "Their territory is where

the trafficking took place."

"O-oh, right. Th-then we're going to arrest Baron Barlier?" Lilly asked.

"No, not yet," I answered.

"Why not?" Rae asked.

"Baron Barlier is too close to Marquess Achard. If we arrest Baron Barlier, Marquess Achard will just pin everything on him and get away scot-free."

"H-how troubling..."

Clément was thorough. There was no doubt he'd already laid the groundwork he needed to shift the blame.

"Then why bother visiting House Barlier?" Rae asked.

"We may not be able to arrest him, but we can arrange for the Baron to cooperate in secret by negotiating a plea deal like Rae did before."

"I-I see!"

Baron Patrice Barlier was close to Clément, so he was likely to have useful information for us—especially since his territory was the one being used for the human trafficking. If we offered him a reduced sentence in exchange for evidence on Clément, we might find the last piece we needed to bring this all to a close.

"But...are you sure about this, Miss Claire?" Rae asked.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"House Barlier is the house of your friend, Lady Pepi."

"...And what does that have to do with anything?"

"Even if House Barlier's punishment can be reduced with a plea bargain, human trafficking is a serious crime. There will be no avoiding them losing their title, at the very least."

In other words, she was asking if I could remain committed to justice even if it meant losing a dear friend.

"You don't think I already understand that?"

"...So you're prepared for whatever may come?"

"I am. It's true that Pepi may come to hate me...but she is a noble of the house of Bauer too. She will accept her fate. I have faith in the strength of her character."

She might resent me, of course. But even so, I had to do what I had to do. If I faltered here, how could I ever hope to convict my own father?

"I-I don't understand..." Lilly began. "H-how can you be so righteous, even if it means ruining your own friend?"

I was confused by her question. Was being righteous not the obvious choice?

Rae clarified, "I think what Miss Lilly is trying to ask is how you can be so strict...especially when your position would allow you to be lenient if you so wished."

"Showing favoritism would make us no different from the very corrupt nobles we pursue," I answered. "If I am to believe myself righteous, then I must be impartial."

"...E-even if that means you'll have to convict your own father?"

I hesitated for a moment before answering, "... Even then."

At this point in our investigation, it was almost certain that Salas and my father were corrupt. Lilly seemed to be on the fence regarding whether or not she should proceed, though. Did she have what it took to arrest her own father?

"Cardinal Lilly, if this is too much, you're free to step away from the investigation," I said. She averted her gaze. I continued, "You've already done more than enough. Nobody will blame you if you want to leave the rest to Rae and me."

I could see hesitation on her face. For a moment, I thought she might actually pull out. But then she shook her head, as though to banish her own doubts, and firmly said, "N-no, it's okay. I want to see this through to the end."

"Are you sure? You're not a noble. You have no obligation to—"

"I-I am a woman of the cloth," she interrupted. "My faith teaches one to live

righteously and morally. J-just as nobles are bound by their code of honor, men and women of faith must live in a way that upholds their faith's teachings. B-besides, I may not be a noble, but my father is. H-he had a duty to act justly. A-and as he has failed to do that, the duty now falls upon me to stop him."

"Cardinal Lilly..."

Ralaire nuzzled up against Lilly's hand to soothe her. Lilly's stiff expression eased. "Th-the Spirit God sees all. Finding evidence of my own father's crimes is a trial God has given me, and I intend to see it through, for all wrongdoing must be judged."

There was no hesitation in her now. Lilly was by no means a strong-willed woman, but she was honest and just. She might be my rival in love where Rae was concerned, but I could respect her.

"Very well. Then let us work together until the end," I said. "Rae, compile the evidence we have for me. Once you're done, we'll head for the Barlier estate."

"Yes, ma'am."

I would be lying if I said it didn't hurt. I would rather not have done this, if possible. But I was a noble, and this was my duty. *Pepi...I won't ask you to forgive me. But please understand, this is something I must do.*

I reflected on my mother's words: *Be a noble who can make ideals into reality*. Oh, how painful it was to put her words into practice.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself, Baron Barlier?" I said.

Rae, Lilly, and I were at the Barlier estate, sitting across from Baron Patrice Barlier in the parlor. We'd shown him our evidence of his human trafficking, and now he stared at his feet, speechless.

"Can we take your silence as an admission of guilt?" Rae said. "I see no chance you could argue your innocence at this point."

"W-we're prepared to lessen your punishment if you cooperate. Please come clean and work with us," Lilly said.

Rae and Lilly played carrot and stick. Most nobles would fold at this point, but

Patrice remained silent.

"Though they say silence is golden...I do not think that applies here, and I'm sure you're aware of that yourself," I said. He remained silent.

Rae said, "We have evidence the human trafficking was done within your territory. As things stand, you'll be taking all the blame."

Lilly said, "You don't want that, do you? If you don't lessen the punishment, your wife and Lady Pepi—"

"There's nothing I can say to defend myself," he flatly interrupted.

"Pardon?" I asked.

"I admit my crimes. But I planned it all alone. I'm willing to accept whatever punishment awaits." He kept his head bowed so we couldn't see his expression. His voice, while weak, showed he was resigned to his fate.

"Even if Pepi and your wife are punished alongside you?" I asked.

"It pains me to see them dragged into this, but yes. I'll likely be executed, and House Barlier ruined."

"Yes, that is the most probable outcome."

"They will likely experience much hardship...but this way is for the best." His voice had a tremble to it. He was well known for being a cowardly man, so the knowledge that the long Barlier line would come to an end, coupled with his impending execution, undoubtedly shook him. And yet, he was obstinately refusing to give up any information on his collaborator. I was at a loss as to what to do.

Then suddenly, the door swung violently open.

"Father!" Pepi appeared. She seemed furious, probably because she'd been eavesdropping on our conversation. The room should have been soundproofed, though. How could she have heard us? No—I suppose that didn't matter right then.

She stormed up to her father, then grabbed him by the shoulders. "Just tell them, Father! Tell them everything! Tell them it was Marquess Achard who told you to do everything!"

"That's enough, Pepi." Even with his daughter shouting at him, Patrice kept his head down.

"This isn't right! Why do you have to bear all the blame alone?! They said they'll reduce your sentence if you cooperate, didn't they?! Then why not just tell them ev—"

"I said that's enough!" He raised his voice, interrupting his daughter. "I have nothing to tell them. Let me bear the blame alone."

"Father...but why?"

"Lady Claire, thank you for being a good friend to my daughter. It is a shame things had to end this way."

"Baron Barlier...are you truly fine with this?"

"I am." He lifted his head, revealing the face of a man who had made up his mind.

"Father...Father, you fool!" Pepi fell to her knees in tears.

The sight was difficult to endure, but it was my duty to do so. Patrice had made up his mind and would not budge. We had no choice but to give up on collecting evidence against Clément and instead arrest Patrice.

"Don't be too harsh on him, Lady Pepi. Your father is keeping his mouth shut for you and your mother's sake," a soft voice suddenly said. I looked toward the doorway and saw an unexpected face.

"Master Kristoff?"

"Hello, Lady Claire. Mind holding off on the arrest a bit? I'll explain what's going on." Kristoff was holding on to a servant. Sensing something was up, Rae took over restraining the man for Kristoff, who then walked unhurriedly over to Pepi, lifting her up and setting her gently next to her father.

"What do you mean, Master Kristoff? Is my father being threatened?" Pepi asked.

"Indeed he is, and by none other than my very own father Clément. He's threatened to hurt you and your mother if your father doesn't obey him."

Pepi's eyes went wide with shock. She looked at her father, next to her, and he hung his head once more, trembling slightly.

"It makes sense when you really think about it, doesn't it? I mean, why else would a man famous for his timidness partake in such a grand crime?" Kristoff said.

"I did think it was strange," I said. "There was certainly no reason for him to take such a risk."

I'd known Patrice for about as long as I'd known Pepi. By all accounts, he was not the type to do something this audacious.

"It's all part of my father's schemes. Baron Barlier shoulders all the risk while my father reaps all the rewards. Despicable, really. I'm ashamed I'm even related to him." Kristoff's tone and expression were soft, but his words were scathing. "That servant there works for my father. He's been ordered to kill Pepi and Madam Barlier in the event Baron Barlier sells my father out."

"I can't believe it..." Pepi said.

"It's the truth. Your father wouldn't be so tight-lipped, otherwise."

I did think such underhanded actions seemed like something Clément might do.

"Your father is really a wonderful man, Lady Pepi," Kristoff continued. "He tried his hardest to lessen the number of people being trafficked, despite his family being held hostage. He and I even worked to secretly release people."

"He did ...?"

"Indeed, but that's not all. Baron Barlier did all he could to put a stop to my father. The newspaper article on human trafficking that surfaced was his doing. Isn't that right, sir? Your father is by no means a bad man. Please, be proud of him."

Pepi looked up at her father with questioning eyes. He finally broke his silence and said, "Pepi...I'm sorry for not telling you a thing until now."

"F-Father..." She clung to him and broke down in tears, this time out of the relief of knowing her father was innocent.

"Is it all right for you to be saying all this, Master Kristoff? You've essentially confessed your own involvement in the crimes," Rae said.

"It's fine. It's high time my father paid the piper. If anything, I wish I could've come clean sooner."

"Thank you for your cooperation, Master Kristoff," I said.

"Not at all. I'm sorry for all the trouble we've caused you. Baron Barlier...could you do the honors?"

"Yes, of course." Patrice gently peeled Pepi off him and stood up to leave the room. He soon returned clutching a bundle of papers. "I have here proof that Marquess Achard had a hand in the human trafficking, as well as the records of the deals."

"Not even my father can talk his way out of punishment with that evidence," Kristoff said.

"I prepared this in the hope that a day like this would come. I entrust this to you, Lady Claire," Patrice said.

"Thank you. I swear I'll see to it that Marquess Achard meets his comeuppance." I accepted the documents from him. They recorded every act of human trafficking that had been committed in excruciating detail.

"My father is a poor judge of character, it seems," Kristoff said. "To think he'd try and frame Baron Barlier, of all people."

"Indeed. He should have known cowards like me always make preparations for the what-ifs."

"A real coward wouldn't have shown the courage you have."

"Ah, well. I suppose people can be full of surprises."

That was a line I'd heard Pepi say from time to time.

"Thank you for all your help, Baron Barlier, Master Kristoff. I do believe this will be enough to corner Marquess Achard. Rae, Cardinal Lilly, it seems this is finally checkmate."

"Indeed. Let's give it our best, Miss Claire."

"It has been decided that Marquess Achard will be apprehended tomorrow at the music festival," I said.

"I see... So the time has finally come for my father to pay for his crimes."

It was the night before the national music festival. I was talking to Catherine before bed for what could very well be the last time.

Clément seemed to know we'd visited the Barlier estate, as he'd been making himself scarce ever since. Not even his son, Kristoff, knew where he was, but odds were high he was destroying as much evidence and preparing to shift whatever blame he could. He was the organizer of the music festival, though, so he had an obligation to show. We were planning to catch him tomorrow and indict him.

"Be careful, though, Claire. My father isn't someone who would go down without a fight."

"I'm aware."

Catherine gave me a soft smile, making me shift uncomfortably. Tomorrow, if we arrested Clément, House Achard would be done for. Catherine would be without a home. How could she smile despite knowing that?

"You don't need to force yourself to smile, Catherine."

"What do you mean?"

"No matter what face you make, my resolve won't waver. So please, stop forcing yourself to smile."

"Aha ha ha... You saw right through me. There's really no tricking you, huh?" Despite her words, her expression remained unchanged.

"Catherine...what if you became a child of House François?"

"What? Claire, you must be joking. You know that would never happen." She laughed. But I was serious.

"Adoption is an option for us. Being a child of House Achard is enough

pedigree to warrant it."

"Perhaps, but Master Dole would never agree to it. He's famous for showing no mercy to his enemies."

That was true. My dad was well known to never forgive someone who made an enemy of him. That was one of the reasons why he was so feared. But I wouldn't give up just because of that.

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"I'll convince him."
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"How?"

"I just will. Whatever it takes."

"It's impossible, Claire. It would stain the François name if the fact he took pity on the daughter of a criminal and a political enemy got out."

"I wouldn't be so sure. People might think him rather compassion—"

"Claire." Catherine gently but firmly interrupted me as I continued to try to argue. "Don't fill your head with unnecessary things. Just focus on making sure you corner my father tomorrow, okay?"

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"...Okay."
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I agreed out loud, but internally, I hadn't given up on helping her in the slightest. I tried to think how I could save her. If she couldn't live on as a noble, then maybe she could as a commoner, or a nun in a convent?

"Hey, Claire?"

"Yes, Catherine?"

"Just how long have we known each other again?"

"I'd say it's been about ten years already now."

"I see... It feels like it's been both forever and only a brief moment."

I didn't like how she used the past tense there. "We're just getting started. I wouldn't dare leave someone as troublesome as you alone."

"Says you. I'm pretty sure you're the real troublemaker here."

"Oh, you've said it now!" I began tickling her.

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"Ack, uncle, uncle! Claire, stop it!"
"Good grief..."
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After some goofing around, a sudden silence formed. Silence wasn't particularly uncomfortable for us, given how close we were, but something about it didn't sit right with me now. Feeling restless, I began thinking of something to say, but she broke the silence before I could.

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"Claire, could you grab me a candy?"

"This late, again? I'm surprised you haven't developed cavities by now..."

"Ehe heh."

"Hold on, I'll fetch you one."

"Grab one for yourself too."

"I'm all right."
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"Please. I want to share my candy with you. This might be our last chance to."

"...Catherine." I wanted to insist otherwise, but I swallowed my words. I reached into the candy pot on her desk and took out two pieces, giving one to her and putting the other in my own mouth. I immediately tasted the unique flavor of licorice. "Now there's only one piece left."

"Looks like it."

"If you remain on your best behavior tomorrow, I'll buy you some more, Catherine."

"And if I don't?"

"Then I'll eat the last piece myself."

"Oh dear, I wouldn't want that. I guess I'll just have to behave."

"Indeed."

The candy's flavor wasn't quite to my liking, but I did enjoy making small talk with her.

There was a knock at our door. "It's me."

"Emma? What brings you here at this time of night?" I asked.

"Oh, I called for her. For tomorrow," Catherine said.

"Tomorrow? What do you—"

"Emma, go ahead and come in," Catherine interrupted.

"Pardon my intrusion." Emma entered, still in her servant uniform.

"I don't want you to worry about me, Claire. But please, look after Emma once I'm gone," Catherine said.

"There you go aga—"

"Please." Her face was serious for once, her usual lazy look nowhere to be found. I couldn't say no to such a face, and she likely knew that too.

I sighed and said, "...Fine. I'll help her look for work once—"

"I'm afraid I'll have to refuse," Emma sternly said to Catherine.

"Emma...?"

"There is only one master I will ever serve, and it is you, Lady Catherine." Her somber, unyielding expression did not shift as she pledged her loyalty.

"Emma... I appreciate the sentiment, but come tomorrow, I won't be able to keep you in my employ."

"It matters not. I do not need pay to serve you."

"Oh, Emma... That can't be true. Please, try to understand..."

"I refuse, my lady."

Seeing Emma not budge an inch, Catherine looked to me for help.

"Tell me, Emma, why are you so fixated on serving Catherine?" I asked.

"Because if she hadn't taken me in, I would have long since died a dog's death. I owe my life to my lady."

According to her, there was once a time when she lived in the slums. She used to be a person of standing in another country but was ruined after she lost a political battle. Drifting aimlessly, she found her way to the Bauer Kingdom, where she was caught stealing and subsequently beaten. That was when Catherine intervened and saved her. From that point onward, she served as

Catherine's personal maid.

I'd thought she was simply following Clément's orders, but it appeared she'd done it all out of genuine concern for Catherine. I couldn't help but giggle. "Oh dear, I'm not so sure what to say, Catherine."

"Don't just laugh! Help me convince her," Catherine pleaded.

"I'm afraid I cannot be swayed on this matter," Emma said.

"Emmaaaa..." Catherine groaned. The sight of her so stumped made me continue to laugh.

"Come on, Catherine," I said. "Stop being so stubborn. Let's think of a way we can stay together past tomorrow. Okay?"

"Claire..."

"You have a friend and a loyal servant by your side. Please, lean on the two of us."

She sighed. "The two of you can be so obstinate, really." Raising her arms in surrender, she stared up at the ceiling. She seemed happy, though. There was a mountain of problems that needed to be cleared up, but I felt as though, somehow, everything would be okay.

...But of course, life was never so convenient.

The Bauer Music Festival was an international event hosted by the king himself. King l'Ausseil and the other members of the royal family would be in attendance. Many prominent musicians from Bauer would perform, as well as musicians from our neighbors in the Alpes and Sousse, and Loro to the west. This was an incredibly prestigious event. In fact, there was no greater honor for a musician than to be invited to perform at the Bauer Music Festival. One could go so far as to say it guaranteed you a successful career.

"Allow me to apologize for ruining what should be such a wonderful opportunity for you two." I bowed apologetically to Pepi and Loretta, who were dressed for their performance. The two frantically shook their heads.

"Please raise your head, Miss Claire!"

"Please! It's true the music festival will be ruined, but we will have other chances to make names for ourselves."

Lifting my head, I saw they both looked resolute. They'd been so weak-willed when I first got to know them. They really had changed greatly since then.

"This is all Master Clément's fault, anyway."

"Yeah! You didn't do anything wrong, Miss Claire."

"Thank you. And I appreciate your help," I said.

We believed Clément would show himself at the very end of the music festival for the award ceremony. As King l'Ausseil would be in attendance, security would be strict. Naturally, that meant people would be examined as they entered, and only select persons would be allowed near the stage. For that reason, I needed Loretta and Pepi's help.

"For the time being, I want you two to focus entirely on your performance," I said.

"We will!"

"We'll make it a good one!"

And so the music festival began. The Royal Academy concert hall was filled to the brim, mostly with nobility invited from various countries. They listened raptly as the musicians performed, none the wiser to the chaos that would shortly ensue.

"Lady Loretta and Lady Pepi will be up soon, Miss Claire," Rae said, her eyes on the schedule.

"I know," I replied.

"I-I hope they can focus on their performance," Lilly said with worry.

"I'm sure they'll be just fine," I soothed. I kept a watchful eye on the concert hall but couldn't help but feel a sense of foreboding... There are too many soldiers present. There must be private troops belonging to House Achard among them. What are you plotting, Clément?

Pepi and Loretta took the stage. I remembered Pepi telling me it was her dream to play violin at a concert with Loretta accompanying her on the piano. It seemed her long-held dream was finally coming true, here and now.

Pepi readied her violin and smiled at Loretta. Loretta took her place at the piano and signaled to Pepi that she was ready. Together, they began to play.

Loretta, lauded as the pianist with a rainbow palette, added her vibrant melody to Pepi's transcendentally precise and technical playing. Their styles, so different, should have clashed—but instead, they blended paradoxically into one another, entwining to form a sound like never before.

Pepi, Loretta... You're both so wonderful.

A number of people in the audience took out handkerchiefs to wipe their tears. The two were simply that moving.

Their performance would likely last for around ten minutes, the standard for a violin-piano piece. But as everyone listened, the same thought was shared:

More, more. Please don't let this performance end.

Eventually, however, it had to cease. When the last note faded into silence, the concert hall erupted into applause.

"Bravo!"

"May these new prodigies be blessed!"

"That was a wonderful performance! Good show!"

The audience showered them with praise as they left the stage. I, myself, clapped hard enough for my hands to sting.

"I don't know much about music, but I can tell Lady Pepi and Lady Loretta are incredible," Rae said.

"Y-yeah," Lilly agreed.

"Of course they're incredible," I said proudly. "They're dear friends of *the* Claire François, after all."

Things continued on until only the award ceremony was left. All the musicians

who'd performed gathered on stage for the audience to applaud them. King l'Ausseil and Thane could be seen watching from the upper gallery.

The master of ceremonies said, "And now, a word from the organizer of this event, Clément Achard."

The place grew quiet. I shared a look with Rae and Lilly, and the two nodded back at me. I turned my attention to the stage and focused. A spotlight shone down as an elderly gentleman appeared from the wings, leaning on a cane. It was Clément—or at least it seemed like him. We couldn't rule out the possibility of a body double quite yet.

"It has been an honor to once again organize the prestigious Bauer Music Festival for His Majesty. We have been joined by many splendid performers this year, and I would like to take this opportunity to..." There was no doubting that sonorous voice belonged to Clément. This should be enough. The man on stage couldn't possibly be a double. "...and with this, I conclude my address. Thank you for listening. And now for the awards."

"I object!" A shout came from the same stage Clément stood on. "A man who threatened and tried to pin his crimes on my father, Patrice Barlier, has no right to hand out awards at our honorable music festival!" It was Pepi. Her accusation echoed throughout the whole concert hall.

"Oh, you're that Barlier girl... How foolish. What is this nonsense you speak of?" Clément said.

"What she's saying is true!" I stood up and raised my voice as well before he could begin making excuses. He took one look at me and clicked his tongue in irritation, glaring. That wouldn't stop me, though. I was no longer the powerless woman I'd been when I visited the Achard estate before. I had friends I could count on, connections, and Rae.

"You as well, young lady of House François? Oh, how far the noble houses of Bauer have fallen. I can't believe I'm hearing such baseless accusations."

"Will you still be able to say that after seeing this?" Using the light from my fire magic, I projected a summary of the data on human trafficking we'd found onto the stage curtains. The crowd began to murmur.

"Clément, what do you have to say for yourself?" From up high in the gallery, King l'Ausseil questioned Clément.

I thought Clément would panic at this point, but instead he remained calm. "I have no knowledge of any of this. This is all news to me. I swear, this must be a plot of Dole's to—"

"Enough of the farce. I'm sure you're aware yourself that the evidence presented is not something you can talk your way out of," the king sternly said. Clément replied with silence. "Hmph. I'll hear your excuses once you're locked away. Soldiers, arrest this man."

On the king's orders, the soldiers moved to apprehend Clément. At least, they were *supposed* to.

"...What is the meaning of this? I said arrest—"

"I guess that's it, then. Seeing as there's no going back, I might as well take a souvenir with me." Clément lifted his cane and pointed the tip at King l'Ausseil. "Soldiers, bring me His Majesty l'Ausseil's head."

"Enough of this, Marquess Ach... Clément! End your vain struggling!" I yelled.

"Vain? I think not, child. You may think you had me cornered, but it is you who has been placed in checkmate."

We were naive. We'd thought simply finding evidence and making his guilt undeniable would be enough, but of course, he wouldn't go down so easily. Clément was prepared to flee—and with King l'Ausseil's head if he could. It wasn't hard to imagine who he might present King l'Ausseil's head to.

"Clément, you're working for the Empire, aren't you?!"

"Don't be silly. The Empire is nothing more than a useful tool to me, just like Barlier. I do not work for anybody."

"Miss Claire, please get back!" Rae shouted.

"Let me go, Rae! I will not stand by and watch as His Majesty is put in danger!" It wasn't just King l'Ausseil we had to worry about. The concert hall was filled with prominent people, many of them political figures. This was no

time to even think about capturing Clément anymore.

"Your Majesty, please leave this place to me and flee." Up in the gallery, Thane encouraged his father to leave without him.

"Thane?"

"You must remain safe, for the good of Bauer. You are meant for greater things than to fall to the likes of Clément."

"Thane, you—"

"Go now. Quickly."

"...Very well." The majority of the few knights accompanying them left with the king. It appeared Thane was prepared to fend for himself.

"Oh, goodness... Master Thane can be so gallant!" I exclaimed.

I lightly charred the private soldiers of Clément who approached us, a wry grin on my face. Thane probably knew the rumors concerning his parentage and had his own doubts about his origins—which was to say he suspected King l'Ausseil might not be his true father. But even so, he prioritized the king's safety. His respect for the king ran deeper than blood ties ever could.

"Meanwhile, this man's as despicable as they come!" Clément had taken the musicians on stage hostage and was watching the chaos unfold as if it were a show, while his private soldiers did all the work. He was probably forcing his men's compliance with threats, like he'd done with Patrice Barlier. That was the only reason I held back on my fire magic at all.

"You girls are persistent," he said in a low voice. "But it ends here. You'd do well to pay attention too, Prince Thane." I looked over at the stage to see he was holding a dagger at Loretta's throat. "Nobody move or I'll kill the girl."

"Just try it. I'll burn you to a crisp the moment you do," I said.

"Can you? Alongside her?"

"...You're scum."

"I prefer 'shrewd' myself." The folds of his face deepened as he smiled. He looked monstrous.

Loretta was a strong girl who would normally not have allowed herself to have been made a hostage, but she was unarmed now. It'd be one thing if she could have snuck a wand through inspections, but alas. As the organizer, Clément likely had no trouble sneaking his dagger in.

"Miss Claire, don't worry about me. Just do it," Loretta said.

"Don't be foolish!"

"I mean it. I'm willing to die if it's for your sake."

"Don't say that, Loretta! I swear I'll save you, so just be quiet!"

"No!" she shrieked with grief, making me flinch.

"I see you're still no more than a child, daughter of Melia," Clément taunted. "You can't even understand what the Kugret girl is trying to tell you."

"...And you're saying you can?"

"How could I not? The girl is trying to tell you she has feelings for you. It's a mystery how you can be so dense."

"Wha-Loretta, you...?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Claire. I have no right to fall for you. But the thought of you being harmed terrifies me, so please..." She cast her gaze to the ground, shadowing her face. I saw something glisten as it fell from her face to the carpet.

"Surrender, child," Clément said. "I'll be gracious and call this a draw, for now. You've trumped me in the scheme of things, at least where this country is concerned, but our real showdown has yet to take place."

"Do you think we'll just let you walk out of here?" Rae said.

"I do, commoner. And there's not a single thing you can do about it."

"Is that right? But I don't care what happens to Lady Loretta. Or to Master Thane or King l'Ausseil, for that matter."

"Rae?!" Eyes wide, I gawked at her.

"Ah, yes. Your top priority is the François girl there, isn't it?" Clément said.

"Correct. I'm surprised you pieced that together, despite your senility."

"But if that's the case, stopping me at the cost of the François girl's friend will only make her lose all faith in you."

"...Damned old coot."

"Again, I prefer to be called 'shrewd.""

Even Rae seemed to be in the palm of his hand. Wasn't there something, anything we could do?

"All of you stay right where you are," Clément said. "Soldiers, chase after l'Ausseil. I'll be—"

"You think that's enough, Pepi?"

"I'd say so, Loretta."

Just when it looked like all hope was lost...

"Angelic Howl!"

A *sound*—of great volume, but so low in pitch I could feel it reverberate through me—made everyone present, including us, fall to our knees.

"What...is this?!"

"This is checkmate, for good this time! Right, Loretta?"

"Yeah."

Before he could stand—much less understand what had happened—Loretta seized Clément and tied him up with one of the strings of a nearby bass.

"Y-you, Barlier girl! What was that?!" Clément shouted.

"Are you familiar with Hateful Cry, Master Clément? What I did was recreate that with an instrument. I didn't think it'd be so powerful and widespread, though."

Pepi grinned broadly as she revealed her secret. Hateful Cry was a type of intimidating roar used by monsters. Hearing it without protection left one unable to move for a brief time. Ralaire's mother, the giant water slime, had used it before—and apparently, Pepi could replicate it with magic.

"...Then that instrument there is a magic tool?" Clément asked.

"That's right. I disguised it a little, though." Pepi stuck her tongue out impishly, like a child after a successful prank.

"I...I was defeated by such a parlor trick?"

"That you were. It's over, Clément."

"This cannot be! Soldiers, what are you dawdling for?! Stand up and do something already!" he ordered.

Not a single person obeyed. After observing Clément be captured, his private soldiers turned themselves in one by one. The man who could only threaten his way into being obeyed was rendered toothless the moment he was captured. A pitiful end, indeed.

After recovering from Pepi's magic, I ran over and hugged her and Loretta. "Well done, you two!"

"Ow, ow, ow! You're hurting me, Miss Claire!" Loretta said.

"Oh, you can bear this much. I can't believe you went so far with your act. I was worried, you know?"

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"Act...?"
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"You know, that thing where you pretended to like me," I said, assuming it was all an act. For some reason, Loretta released a terribly grandiose sigh. "Loretta? Is something the matter?"

"You have my sympathies, Lady Loretta," Rae said.

"Yeah, this seems hopeless," Loretta groaned.

"You'll be fine. You have me, after all," Pepi said.

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

Just as the seeds of yet more chaos were being sown, the king walked back in.

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"Everyone, you've done well."
  "Your Majesty!" We all kneeled.
  "At ease. You all handled the situation wonderfully. Especially you two, Lady
Barlier and Lady Kugret. You both deserve to be rewarded appropriately."
  "Not at all!"
  "Such kind words are wasted on us!"
  Pepi and Loretta remained humble before the king.
  "Claire François, Rae Taylor, Lilly Lilium."
  "Your Majesty."
  "Yes?"
  "Y-yes?"
  "I remember your report called for House Barlier's punishment to be
reduced?"
  "That is indeed the case, Your Majesty," I answered.
  "I will consider it. Expect a favorable answer soon. In the meantime, I ask that
you continue your work in the Secret Service."
  "As you wish."
  He gave an approving nod and left the concert hall with his soldiers in tow.
  "... That was kind of a close one with Clément there, huh?" Rae said.
  "Indeed. Not even you knew what to do, for once," I said.
  "Yeah. It's because he and I are alike in a way, I guess."
  "Wh-what do you mean?" Lilly asked.
  "We both do whatever it takes to achieve our goals."
  "A-ah..." Lilly seemed to understand.
  "I disagree. I don't think you two are alike at all," I flatly said.
  "And why's that?"
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"Because your goals would never be anything so malicious."

"...See that, Loretta?" Pepi whispered.

"It's not fair. They're practically on the same wavelength," Loretta groaned.

"Whatever are you two talking about?" I asked.

"Not a single thing!"

"Just talking about how you can be really dense!"

"Pardon?!"

As we shared a moment of conversation and laughter, I spotted someone at the edge of my vision. I excused myself and followed them.

"You—stop right there," I called out.

We were just outside the employee exit at the rear of the concert hall, in a dark alley. The man I'd stopped was dressed in a tailcoat and looked for all intents and purposes to be a musician. There was nothing overtly off about it, but I found it strange that he was sneaking out through the back like this.

"Er, can I help you?"

"I'd like to ask you a few questions, if that's all right. Do you have the time?"

"I'm afraid I'm in a bit of a rush. If that'll be all, then I'll excuse my—"

"Move and I'll shoot."

"Wh-what?!"

I took the wand I had returned as I left the concert hall and pointed it his way. I wasn't certain, but something didn't feel right about the man. I felt a sense of déjà vu talking to him.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked.

"...Show me your hands."

"Okay...?" The man obeyed. I neared slightly and carefully inspected his hands and what he held. He had a violin just like Pepi's, as well as a violin bow. Nothing seemed unusual, but my suspicion still remained.

"The bracelet, Claire," someone drawled sleepily.

"The bracelet? A transformation magic tool!" I exclaimed.

"Blast!" The man clicked his tongue and broke into a run.

"That's far enough." A woman appeared and pinned the man to the ground.

"Emma?! Are you betraying me?!"

"My master has always been Lady Catherine and none other. I have no recollection of ever serving you."

"Unhand me! Unhand me right this instant, or else!"

The one restraining the man was Emma. The way she held him in place certainly didn't look like something an ordinary maid would be trained to do.

"Emma? Catherine? What are you two doing here? Wait..." From their conversation, I pieced things together. "Then this man is..."

"Yeah. Emma, take off the bracelet," Catherine said.

"Yes, my lady." Emma pulled the man's bracelet off, causing his figure to warp before my eyes.

"Clément Achard? But how?" I asked.

"He had a musician who could use magic ready to swap places with him just in case. Kind of like...castling magic, if that makes sense," Catherine answered, using a chess metaphor. She approached, wheeling her chair closer.

"Catherine, you fool! Have you forgotten who it was that raised you?!" Clément said.

"And I greatly appreciate all you've done for me, Father. But please, let's put an end to this. Don't drag the Achard name through the mud any more than you already have."

"Nonsense!" He writhed in Emma's hold, still trying to flee. "I am House Achard! So long as I'm alive, House Achard lives on!"

"No, Father. Our house has been doomed for a long time now. Ever since that day ten years ago."

"...Ten years ago? Catherine, what are you saying?" I asked. I had a bad feeling that something I wouldn't like was about to follow.

"I must apologize to you, Claire."

"...Catherine?"

"Ten years ago, the one who killed Lady Melia, your mother...was me."

"...What?" I couldn't make sense of her words for a moment. I was sure my ears had heard her correctly. But my heart just refused to understand. How? How could such a thing be possible?! "What are you saying, Catherine? My mother died in an accident."

"That accident was arranged. I assassinated her on my father's orders."

"What...? No... No, I don't understand!" Feeling terribly confused, I lifted my wand to point it at her.

She didn't move, but just smiled. Smiled the same smile she always did.

"On that day, the commoner carriage that collided with your parents' carriage had me and three other assassins inside. After stopping your parents' carriage in a way that looked like an accident, we attacked them. The one who stopped our attack was Lady Melia."

"My mother...?"

"I assume Master Dole's magic isn't suited for combat, as we only fought against Lady Melia. She sealed her carriage with Master Dole inside it using protection magic, then faced us empty-handed." She closed her eyes as though remembering the moment.

"...And then?"

"It was a draw, I suppose. Lady Melia was left unable to fight, but so were we. I injured my left leg and could no longer move. And then Lady Melia...died protecting me."

"...What? I...I don't...understand."

She opened her eyes again, her face warped with self-hatred. "We were being monitored. If we failed, another group was in place to make sure we were

eliminated, thereby silencing us. But I survived...thanks to Lady Melia."

"Mother..."

"After it was all over and done, my father ordered me to use my magic to make it as though nothing ever happened. Those at the scene only remember it as an accident now."

"Catherine...? I can't...believe this."

"Claire... Your mother died because of me, and I've always wanted to apologize for it. So that's what I'm doing. I'm sorry." She bowed as deep as she could from her wheelchair.

"Why...why tell me now of all times?!"

"I won't ask you to forgive me. I know I don't deserve forgiveness. But let me at least atone."

"Catherine...?"

She lifted her head. I could now see she held a wand in her hand.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to cause any more harm than I already have." She took her wand and pointed it at Clément.

"Catherine?! What do you think you're doing?!" he shouted.

"This is goodbye, Father."

"St-stop! I'm still not finished! I'll flee to the Empire and—"

"Erase."

I felt powerful magic come from her wand. Something my eyes couldn't see began to envelop Clément.

"N-no! I don't want to forget myself! My being! Somebody! Somebody... help...me..." He went limp with a thud.

"...Did you kill him?" I asked.

"No. I just tampered with his mind a little."

"I thought your magic only allowed you to hide?"

"It can be used that way. But its true nature is something entirely different."

She issued an order to Emma, who began hauling Clément off. "My magic erases memory. I hide myself by erasing people's memory of seeing me."

"How clever."

"Ehe heh, thank you. But this magic's original purpose was for a different thing." She pointed her wand my way.

"Catherine?!" I was careless. I shouldn't have taken what she said about doing no further harm at face value.

"Claire. I'm going to erase your...no, everyone's memory of me."

"...Catherine?"

"Not even death would be enough for me to atone for what I've done. So instead, I'm going to live my life forgotten by everyone."

"But...that's no different than not existing!" Living life unnoticed, unremembered—such a thing could not be called living. That was a fate worse than death.

"Yeah. But such a cursed life is all I deserve."

"Don't do this, Catherine!"

"I'm sorry."

I felt strength drain from my limbs as something dear faded from my mind. "No! I won't forget, I swear! No matter what!"

"Claire..."

"Just you watch, Catherine! ...No matter how strong you act...I know you..." My consciousness grew distant... Who was I talking to again?

"...I don't want to do this...really. But...I have to." In my last moments of consciousness, I heard somebody force those words out through sobs. I could no longer recall who they were, though. Their final words were full of sadness. "...Goodbye, Claire."

Unable to stop the tears streaming down my cheeks, I fell into a deep slumber.

When I awoke, I was in my dorm room. The last thing I recalled was cornering Clément, and thenand then what?



I rewound my fuzzy memory as far back as possible while I looked around the room. Nothing seemed off. It was an ordinary room with a bunk bed that only had a mattress on the bottom bunk, a single desk, and a dresser.

It was bright outside. Warm rays beamed into the room, telling me it was closer to noon than morning.

"Miss Claire!" a voice called. The door burst open right after.

"Rae? Goodness. Even if it's you, you should at least knock," I said with a scoff.

"Even if it's me...? Are you saying I'm special to you or something?!"

"Urk... I swear, you're getting too full of yourself these days."

"Ehe heh, my bad. Anyway, how are you feeling?" She turned serious and gave me a worried look.

"Pardon? I feel fine."

"Good, good. I was worried for a second."

"Did something happen?"

"Well, yeah. Don't tell me you don't remember?" She put her hands on her hips and gave me a stern look.

"My memory is a little fuzzy. Fill me in."

"We found you collapsed outside the concert hall's back entrance. What were you doing there? You completely disappeared on us."

"I...indeed. What was I doing there?" I couldn't remember. I felt as though I had been chasing someone, though.

"I guess even wise old Miss Claire has lapses of memory from time to time, huh?"

"But of course. My memory may be good, but even I am only human."

"Yeeep. Incidentally, I have every outfit you've ever worn and every hairstyle you've ever sported, all the way from the day I met you to this day, perfectly memorized."

"What a meaningless thing to waste memory on!" What sane person would even bother to memorize such things?

"It's not meaningless to me. We all have things we want to commit to memory, right?"

"Well... I suppose."

"For me, it's everything to do with you. I want to remember as many things about you for as long as I can."

"Yes, yes, I get it. I think that's quite enough of that," I said in exasperation.

Rae frowned then, thinking. "Huh..."

"Is something the matter?"

"No, it's just... I feel like I'm forgetting something important."

"What a coincidence. I feel the same way."

"Oh, I know what it must be! We forgot your good morning kiss—"

I threw my pillow at her. "Go ahead and forget that idea for all eternity!"

"I'm kidding, sheesh. I want you to initiate our first kiss, anyway."

"Which will never happen, just so you're aware."

"Boo, you can be such a spoilsport... But I love that about you too!"

"...You exhaust me." I didn't even bother to hide my fatigue.

"Anyway, it's the truth that we found you collapsed on the ground, so try to get some rest today. You can take time off from your Secret Service duties today and tomorrow."

"Absolutely not. We still have Salas and my father to catch."

"Clément was a big fish. I'm sure His Majesty would be fine with you taking some time off."

"But..."

"Listen here, Miss Claire." She lifted a finger like a stern teacher admonishing a pupil. "There's no good work to be done without good health first."

"Is that so ...?"

"Only scumbag bosses enjoy forcing people to work while they're unwell."

"And who would our boss be? Master Rod?" If so, she was making quite a rude statement.

"Er, no. I was speaking more abstractly."

"Really? It sounded quite personal, though?"

"Well... Let's just say I have some strong opinions regarding unlawful worker exploitation."

"I, um, I see..." I wasn't quite sure what she was on about, but I think I got the gist.

"At any rate, please stay in bed and rest for the day. I'll bring you breakfast... or rather lunch, given the time."

"Thank you."

"Do you have an appetite?"

"More or less."

"All right. I'll bring you something soon."

"Thank you, Rae."

She left the room to prepare lunch for me then.

"...Am I really just supposed to stay in bed all day?"

I knew Rae would complain about it once she got back, but I figured my time was better spent reading instead of trying to sleep again. I got up and walked over to my desk.

"Hm? What's this...?" On my desk was a candy pot I'd never seen before. I wondered if Rae had bought it for me, but there was only a single piece of candy left inside. "Is this...licorice?"

Its unmistakable scent tickled my nose. I wasn't particularly fond of the smell of licorice, but before I even knew it, I was putting the piece into my mouth.

"...Huh?" Tears abruptly streamed down my face. I did not know why I was

crying, but no matter how much I wiped the tears away, they wouldn't stop coming. I felt as if someone dear had just left my side, though I didn't have even the faintest memory of who they might be.

"...Just what in the world has come over me?" After some time, I finished the candy and my storm of emotions subsided.

"Thank you for waiting, Miss Cla—hey! Didn't I tell you to stay in bed and rest?"

"It's not like I can go back to sleep when I've only just woken—wha, hey!"

The instant she saw my face, she put her tray of food on the desk and brought her face right up to mine. "Did something happen, Miss Claire?"

"Wh-what? Why are you so close to me?! Back up a little bit!"

"Your eyes are red. Have you been crying?"

"My eyes are red because I've just woken up. It's nothing to worry about."

"But your eyes were normal before. And there's no way I could be wrong. After all, my 'Miss Claire' memory bank is flawless!"

"I said it's nothing to worry about!" I didn't know how I would even begin to explain why I had been crying, or why I had felt such sadness. I didn't know myself, after all. "I'm fine, so let's just eat, okay? Now, what did you bring us?"

"You're not getting off that easy. We'll continue this discussion later. But for lunch, I brought us..."

Thereafter, the two of us were the same as we ever were.

Such was the manner in which I lost all memory of a friend who had been dear to me—and didn't even know it.

Interlude:

Even If All Should Forget You (Catherine Achard)

S TARTING WITH CLAIRE, I erased myself from the memories of everyone I knew, save for one person. I intended to keep doing this for the rest of my life, even with the people I went on to meet from here. It would be my way of atoning.

I looked at Claire, now unconscious. She was so fierce, but she looked so terribly youthful when she was asleep like this. The same youthful girl whom I was supposed to kill long ago.

I'd refrained from telling her this part, but the truth was that it was no coincidence she and I became childhood friends. My father had secretly ordered me to get close to her, all so I could patiently wait for an opportune moment to end her life. Of course, I only pretended to follow through with his orders. I could never kill Claire—especially not when I owed my life to her mother, Melia. But by feigning obedience to my father and pretending I was waiting for a chance to kill her, I could prevent my father from sending further assassins her way.

Of course, all that pretending ended today.

I picked her up for one last hug, then gently laid her down. I couldn't stay long. My preparations were already made. All that remained was to quickly leave Bauer.

I cursed how slow the wheelchair made me as I traveled to the royal capital's west gate. Nightlife in the capital was lively. The moon was already high in the sky, yet cheerful voices could still be heard from the diners and pubs I passed. People gathered to celebrate the end of a day's work together with friends—something I would never experience again. The only thing that awaited me was solitude.

I'd lived most of my life with Claire by my side. I had no clue how long I would hold up on my own. But I had to try and persevere regardless. Suicide was too

cowardly an escape for someone who'd done the things I had. I had to atone the hard way.

"I hope Claire made it back to the dorms safely..." I mused. I was sure she would be fine even if I were gone. She had Rae to look after her. Claire hadn't fully opened her heart to her yet, but it seemed only a matter of time at this point. Those two were sure to get together before long.

Claire had many people by her side, in fact. She had Pepi, Loretta, and until recently, Lene too. The one who left the strongest impression on me, though, was Manaria—the girl Claire claimed was like an older sister to her.

The first time I met her, she canceled out my magic right away and asked me, "Are you Claire's enemy? Or her ally?" She'd seen right through my magic, identifying what it really was and understanding its affinity for assassination work. I knew she might kill me right then and there depending on how I answered, so I told her the whole truth.

She replied, "...I see. Come to me if you ever need help, then. I might be able to do something for you." In that moment, when she accepted and acknowledged me as a friend of Claire's, I understood how much she cared for her "little sister."

"How nice..." I found myself a bit jealous, even though I shouldn't. I had no right to desire people like Rae or Manaria in my life. I'd made my choice. I would live in solitude from here on out. "But at the very least, I want you to be happy, Claire."

Eventually, I arrived at the western gate.

"Hm? What are you after, then?" the gatekeeper called out upon noticing me.

"Good evening. I was hoping you could let me through?"

"Sorry, gate's closed for the day. Come back tomorrow."

"Oh, but tomorrow's a bit difficult for me." There shouldn't be anyone left who remembered me, but given what had just happened with my father, things were going to get hectic soon. I'd rather leave before border inspections grew tighter, if possible.

"No means no. Gate's closed."

"Well, I guess you leave me no choice." I gathered what remaining magic I had left in me and took the gatekeeper's memory of me. I gently caught him as he lost consciousness and collapsed. "Sorry, but I really do need to get through."

I placed him gently on the ground and began to wheel my way through the gate.

"And where do you think you're going without me, my lady?"

"...Huh?" Right as I passed under, I heard a voice call out. I turned around and saw someone I'd never expected to see again. "...Emma?"

"I've been looking all over for you. I take my eyes off you for one second and you up and disappear."

"But...I..."

"If you have plans to go somewhere, please inform me first."

"...How, Emma?" I should have erased all of Emma's memories of me. How did she still know who I was?

"How what?"

"I...I should have erased all memory anyone has of me. So how do you still remember me?"

"Oh, I see," she said matter-of-factly. "I suppose it's because my body is naturally resistant to magic."

"...It is?"

"Indeed. Nobody quite knows why, but my daughter is wholly resistant to magic, so perhaps it's something hereditary."

Emma had told me in the past that she was once a member of the royal family of a country that no longer existed. She had abandoned her country after its ruin, but apparently had had a daughter before then who was completely resistant to magic.

"That is why I'm afraid to inform you that erasing my memory will be impossible. You will simply have to give up and accept me staying by your side,"

she said.

"I...I can't allow that, Emma. I've decided myself that I'm going to live my life alone. I can't make an exception, not even for you."

"And I've long since decided that you will be my lifelong master, my lady. I will not change my mind...not even for you."

Emma was a stubborn woman. Convincing her would be difficult, if not impossible. But I had to do it. "I'm no longer a lady of House Achard, Emma."

"I am aware."

"I have no money with which to pay you."

"I am aware."

"You have no reason to serve me any longer."

"That is not true. I still have not repaid the debt I owe you."

"Emma..." She seemed to have her heart set on following me.

"I owe my life to you, my lady. You took me in when I was hopeless and lost and gave me a second chance at life." Her eyes were full of sincerity. "Allow me to repay you by joining you on your path of atonement."

She gave me a servant's bow. I sighed heavily and said, "Do whatever you want."

"Thank you, I shall."

"...You're so stubborn, you know that?"

"As are you, my lady."

I began to wheel myself away when I felt her begin pushing the wheelchair from behind me. "Thanks, but I can move myself."

"I do recall you asked me to do what I please, my lady?"

"And I recall you didn't like it when others pushed me, as I needed the exercise?"

"You've moved quite a bit more than usual today. I'd say you've had enough exercise already for the day."

Emma seemed intent on serving me, no matter what. I felt a keen sense of guilt in bringing her along, but at the same time, I was immeasurably happy to not have to make my journey in solitude. "...Emma."

"Yes?"

"...Thank you."

"You are ever welcome, my lady."

I had no idea how I would live, or for how long, but I had a feeling my journey of atonement would be a long one. Even so, I would continue it—together with my awkward but kind-hearted servant.

CLAIRE'S POV

I felt a deep sense of loss in me but never quite learned what caused it. Regardless, we continued to expose corrupt nobles and even contacted the Resistance. Somehow, by following what Rae said, we were able to meet with their leader. I didn't quite understand the meaning or significance of her actions, but Rae seemed to find value in going out of her way to meet the Resistance.

We then cornered Salas with tremendous help from Ralaire, bringing us to the present moment when we were about to settle things once and for all.

"Lilly, you poor soul... May the Spirit have mercy on you." The moment Salas said those words, Lilly collapsed as though she had suddenly been cursed.

"Cardinal Lilly?!" I cried out, running up to her.

"Get away from her, Miss Claire!" Rae pulled me away by tugging my clothes. I saw a metallic gleam appear where I had just been standing, as a few strands of my hair fell through the air.

"Good grief... You couldn't make things easy for me, eh?" A casual voice, out of place in the tense moment, spoke up.

Warily, Rae stepped between me and Lilly. "You..."

"Heya, Rae, Miss Claire. It's been, what, since yesterday?" Lilly spoke as

though she were a completely different person. I recognized this new persona, however. It was the masked man who had stood in our way a number of times now.

"Salas! What have you done to Cardinal Lilly?!" I yelled.

Salas ignored me. "Commoner, you are a dual-caster, right?"

"Answer me!" I yelled.

"Oh, but I am. My specialty in my Academy days was suggestion magic...and my research was in artificially giving someone multiple attributes." Salas gave a sinister smile.

"Guards, apprehend Salas and Lilly," King l'Ausseil ordered. The guards surrounded the two, but...

"You think this riffraff can stop me?" Lilly produced a dagger from nowhere and immediately forced the royal guards on the defensive. These royal guards were, by all means, the best of the best. I doubted even Rae could come out unscathed in a battle against them all. But somehow, Lilly overpowered them all with ease. She was just that much better in combat.

"Cardinal Lilly, stop!" I yelled.

"It's useless. That's Lilly, but it's not her." Salas laughed scornfully. "I was trying to artificially create a dual-caster. I was only partially successful, though."

"What do you mean?" Rae asked.

"I originally intended to imbue individuals with a second attribute," he said, like he was explaining something to a student in danger of failing the class. "But in the end, I could only do so by embedding a second personality within that person. You see, the new personality naturally came with a new magical attribute."

Lilly's magical attribute should be water. If what Salas was saying was true, then she had to have another attribute now. But was such a thing even possible?

"So the masked assassin was Miss Lilly all along?" Rae asked.

"Indeed, and she relayed everything your little investigation uncovered

straight to me. Though I suppose I was still outwitted in the end," he said with a wry smile. That had to be why we couldn't find any issues when we first checked his ledger that one time. Lilly had been feeding him information.

"But she looks completely different!" I cried. "No disguise should be able to change her that much."

"It's probably a magical tool. Remember the one Lilly lent us so I could switch places with Lady Yu?" Rae said.

I recalled exactly what she was talking about. I had only thought it was awfully convenient Lilly had such a thing, but now I understood it was what she used to disguise herself.

"Does the original Lilly know about this?" Rae asked. From her stiff tone, I could tell she already half expected his answer.

"No, she doesn't. If she did, I imagine she would try to take her own life," Salas answered.

How despicable. How could he take such a pure-hearted girl and use her as a pawn for his own schemes?

"Now, Lilly," Salas ordered. "It's time to kill all these people."

"That's quite an ask. Claire and Rae won't go down easily."

"I'm sure you're up to the task."

"Of course I am. But who's to say I'll be able to keep you safe at the same time?"

"Hmph..."

The two talked as Lilly defeated the royal guards one after another. There was no hesitation in her strikes. I couldn't bear to watch her hurt others so casually.

"In that case, prioritize my escape," Salas said.

"As if we'd let you get away!" I yelled, already preparing my Magic Ray. I didn't want to fatally wound Lilly, but the situation being what it was, I was prepared to do what I had to. I moved to a spot where I could keep my eyes on them both and warned, "Salas, Cardinal Lilly. I cannot modulate the effects of

this spell. Surrender, if you want to live."

"Well, what now?" Lilly asked as she defeated the last of the Royal Guards surrounding her. She began working on the Royal Guards surrounding Salas next. She seemed to be ignoring my threat entirely.

"Cardinal Lilly, stop!" I warned her. "If you make one more move, I will fire!"

"Go ahead and try." She ignored me, continuing to swing her dagger. I couldn't allow her to do any further harm.

"...Forgive me!"

I steeled my will and fired Magic Ray at Lilly. Four beams of light shot forth toward her small frame, but...

"Wh-what?!" My magic scattered like mist before reaching her.

"I forgot to mention, but Lilly here is my masterpiece," Salas said with a wide grin. "She's not on Princess Manaria's level, perhaps, but she can rival her in one particular regard."

"...Is that Spellbreaker?" Rae asked.

"No, no, nothing as grand as that. *This* Lilly has high aptitude in wind magic. Her specialty is manipulating time."

Manipulating...time? Then my Magic Ray must have been rewound to a time before it was structured into a spell—when it was just the component magical energy. What an absurd ability.

"You called her your masterpiece," Rae said. "Does that mean there are others?"

"Of course. What parent would test an unverified process on their own child? I didn't start on Lilly until I'd perfected my technique. Let's see, how many orphans did I break before I got here? Ten? Twenty? No, maybe more," Salas answered coolly, despite the horrific nature of his words.

"You fiend!" I changed my target to Salas and fired Magic Ray once more.

"Whoops. Not so fast." But Lilly, now done with all the Royal Guards, canceled it out in just the nick of time.

In that case... "Rae! You get Salas! Rapid fire!"

"Got it!" Rae understood my intent right away, conjuring an impressive twenty ice arrows and surrounding Salas with them.

"Whoa. You've done this before, huh?" Lilly clicked her tongue. She had to stay by Salas's side to nullify the ice arrows, preventing her from making any moves. We continued to rain magic down on them while Lilly defended. We were at a stalemate. Or at least, that's what I thought.

"Give up, Cardinal Lilly!" I said.

"Why?"

"At this rate, you'll run out of magic before we do," Rae said. Lilly was on her own, while Rae and I were working together. We were only using basic magic arrows too. I didn't know how much magic time manipulation consumed, but it had to be more than magic arrows did.

"Miss Lilly, please, let's put an end to this," Rae pleaded.

"Heh. It's not like I'm doing this because I want to, y'know."

"Then why?!"

"Because..." She gave us a self-deprecating smile and pulled out a potion. "He may be a bastard, but he's still my father."

"No—is that cantarella?!" Rae practically shrieked at the sight of the potion. I recalled our fight against Louie in Euclid. He was only an ordinary adventurer, but drinking cantarella had made him absurdly powerful. I hadn't the slightest clue how we could possibly fight Lilly if she became undead, when our magic already didn't work on her.

"What? Of course not. It's a superior magic restoration potion," Lilly answered. I found myself relieved.

"Sounds valuable. I doubt you have many," Rae pointed out.

"Maybe not, but I've got a little trick up my sleeve." Lilly downed the potion, then stared hard at the empty bottle, which refilled before our eyes. She'd rewound time on the bottle. "Voilà—just gotta think outside the box."

I gritted my teeth. Her magic should be nearly fully restored after drinking the potion. If she could repeat the process as many times as she wanted, then the ones who would run out of magic first would be us.

"Sorry, but this fight's gonna be a long one," she taunted.

I racked my brain, trying to think of a way out of our predicament. Then suddenly, the earth began to violently shake.

While I was left bewildered by the sudden shaking, somebody suddenly pushed me down. Not even a moment later, the window glass in the audience chamber shattered.

"What in the world...?" I began to say, before realizing it was Rae who'd pushed me down. She'd lain down on top of me as if to protect me, so for the time being, I remained still.

"...It should be safe now," she said, rising to her feet and then helping me up as well.

I looked around the audience chamber in confusion and astonishment. The beautiful room was in tatters. Furnishings lay broken, and stones were scattered on the red carpet.

"Your Majesty!" a royal guard cried.

I looked around to see somebody run over to the throne. I felt myself go pale. King l'Ausseil lay collapsed there, bleeding profusely from a wound to the head.

"Rae, heal him!" I cried. Before I could even finish my words, she ran over to him and tried her healing magic, but...

"...It's no use. He's gone."

"That can't be..."

Bauer had lost its wise King l'Ausseil. This was a crisis unlike anything the country had ever faced.

"Wait, where are Salas and Cardinal Lilly?!" I looked around but could not see the two. They must have escaped during the chaos. I fought to calm myself and assess the situation. I could only speculate at this point, but it was likely Mt. Sassal had erupted. There were historical accounts of such an event taking place before. But if that were the case, then what followed the eruption was what we *truly* had to fear. Dark times awaited Bauer. As for what I could do at this moment...

While in thought, I noticed Rae had fallen to her knees with a distant look in her eyes. I couldn't blame her, given the situation. But we needed her strength right now. "Rae... Rae! Get it together."

Rae's eyes slowly regained focus. Her mind still seemed elsewhere, however.

"Forget about Salas and Cardinal Lilly for a minute," I said. "Right now, there are much more pressing matters we must attend to."

"Miss Claire..."

"The last time Mt. Sassal erupted, it caused a massive famine and water shortage." Volcanic rock and ash would have a significant effect on crops. If we just stood by and did nothing, many in the kingdom would starve. We had to take action to prevent such a thing. "The kingdom will soon be in crisis, and King l'Ausseil isn't here to see us through it."

Our wise king was now gone. We had to choose a new king, and fast.

"Guards, contact the head of the House of Lords. Call an emergency meeting, then ensure the safety of Master Rod and Master Thane."

I temporarily ignored Rae, who was still in a daze, and issued orders to the Royal Guards who could still move. This would be a race against time. The Royal Guards seemed bewildered as well, but they held themselves together and obeyed my orders, their training keeping them sharp.

Rae was still out of it. I didn't want to have to go this far, but she left me no choice. I slapped her cheek and said, "Get it together! You said you would support me—was that a lie?!"

I was practically pleading for her to come back to her senses. I needed her. I could not stand up alone against the coming trials. I needed Rae by my side.

She rubbed her cheek, still in a slight daze. Gradually, however, light returned to her eyes. "I apologize. I'm fine now."

"Good." I briefly hugged her, as though to make certain she was truly here with me. "We shall overcome this."

"Yes, ma'am!"

The two of us wasted no time getting to work. While we'd responded with acceptable promptness, a certain piece of bad news arrived to stop us in our tracks: Rod could not be found.

Chapter 8:

My Dearest Rae and Me

The DAMAGE CAUSED by the eruption of Mt. Sassal was great. A full third of the House of Lords died in the incident, almost bringing parliament to a standstill. Thankfully, the head of the House of Lords survived. With the presence of the head and my father's quick wit, the parliament remained barely functioning.

An emergency session was convened, with blood relatives filling in for dead or absent members. The first topic of discussion: who would inherit the crown. King l'Ausseil's firstborn prince and heir, Rod, had gone missing during the eruption. According to his inner circle, Rod had been en route to the village at the foot of the mountain, intending to personally convince the residents to evacuate. Rae had been the one to mention the village there to him, but to think he would actually go... And with the worst possible timing too.

It was likely he had been caught by the eruption. It had already been five days with no word from him, and the odds of him being safe seemed slim. Parliament argued greatly about it, but it was understood that a king was needed urgently, so Thane was quickly ushered in. Given that the country was in a state of emergency, the throne could not be left vacant for long. That being said...

"Honestly...what is my father thinking?" I inadvertently clicked my tongue in irritation as I read the newspaper in my room at the Academy. Rae turned to look my way.

I had insisted we keep investigating the issue of my father's corruption, but Rae objected, claiming we needed his power right now. Corrupt he might be, but my father was a skilled politician with no small degree of clout. Rae had said he was a necessary evil at the moment. But that same father of mine was doing something utterly ridiculous.

"What does it say?" she asked. She seemed to sense that I needed to vent or I'd explode.

"That Master Thane's coronation was canceled!" I spat. I tossed the newspaper her way for her to look at. According to the article, talk of Thane taking the throne had gone nowhere. Instead, the faction of nobles supporting Rod, helmed by my father, would run the government. Utterly preposterous. "The ruler of a kingdom must be a king. The only thing the House of Lords should be doing is working to select the next king as quickly as possible."

The article's author shared my opinion. Some newspapers were even accusing the nobles of staging a coup d'état.

Of course, not all nobles agreed with the decision to cancel Thane's coronation. But many of the members of the House of Lords who'd died in the eruption were part of Thane and Yu's factions, and with Yu conceding her claim for the throne entirely, many of her supporters had gone on to join Rod's faction instead. It certainly didn't help that Thane's faction was already the smallest of the three. Most problematic of all, however, was the fact that Rod was missing. The largest of the three factions had lost the very person who kept them in check.

"We should be working as one to overcome this crisis. Feuding amongst ourselves will only frighten the citizenry."

The volcanic rock and ash from the eruption had ruined crops all over the kingdom. Anticipating shortages, heartless merchants bought up food, causing prices to soar. My father's provisional government—at least, he called it *provisional*—was rationing food out, but there was no telling how long supplies would last.

I wasn't keen on standing idly by, however. If my father and his people were straying from the right path, then as his daughter, it was my duty to set him right. That being said, I doubted he would listen to me, even if I did object to his actions. To make him bend, I had to go a step further.

"I'm going to see Thane. Rae, go ahead and send word."

It was my plan to appeal to Thane. He may have lost his chance at the throne because of my father, but he was still the person most likely to be the next king. If I could get the court's support, then maybe I could sway my father's mind on things.

"...I don't know if that's possible."

"Why?!" I inadvertently yelled. I knew I shouldn't be taking things out on her, but after running this way and that after the eruption, I didn't have much restraint left in me.

"Miss Claire, you are the daughter of the man blocking Thane's ascension to the throne. Thane's supporters see you as their sworn enemy."

"Argh..."

She was right. There was no way the royal court would entertain the daughter of the one who took their power. I couldn't believe such an obvious thing had slipped my mind.

"Miss Claire, please go easy on yourself. Ever since the eruption, you've been working too hard." Rae tried to comfort me, but I could not agree with her.

"I only did what needed to be done. If only my father would do the same..."

My father's actions had been incomprehensible. The newspaper even suggested he might be trying to usurp the throne. Was this really the man who taught me how a Bauer noble was meant to act? What happened to all his lofty ideals of justice? Father... What has happened to you?

Rae said, "You have done everything you possibly can. You need to take a break. You've barely slept at all these past few days."

I touched my face, feeling how dry my skin was. Rae had been diligently doing skincare for me every day, but I hadn't properly bathed in a while. My lack of sleep was also dire. I could last another couple days like this, perhaps, but not much longer before I gave out.

"I'm fine. Really. But..." I stood up and moved closer to her. "...I suppose I'm just a little tired. May I stay like this for a little while?"

"M-Miss Claire?!"

Gently, I leaned against her shoulder.

"I'm glad you're here, Rae. I wouldn't have been able to do this alone."

"Miss Claire, are you all right? You never act this lovey-dovey with me. Is

something wro—"

"I'm showing you affection. Isn't that what you call it?"

"Umm, I suppose..." She seemed bewildered by my actions.

"Lene used to let me do this."

"Oh... I see."

Lene wasn't here anymore, though. The thought of Rae also leaving my side one day made my heart sink.

"I'm proud of my noble lineage, but sometimes...really, only sometimes...I dream of being freed from this sense of duty," I said.

"That's an understandable desire. You could do it, you know. Quit being a noble."

"I can't do that. I've lived in the lap of luxury my entire life. That means I have a duty to serve the people as best as I can, especially in this time of emergency."

"You're such an earnest person, Miss Claire." She smiled wryly. "All right. Just as a what-if, if you weren't a noble, is there something you would want to do?"

"Well..." I thought for a long moment. What a question. Being a noble was the most natural thing in the world to me. It was hard to envision a life where I wasn't one, but... "I should like to learn how to cook and sew."

"How unexpected. You want to do peasant things?"

"You've taken good care of me. If I were no longer an aristocrat, such tasks would be the only way I could repay you."

Her eyes went wide.

I said, "What does that look mean? Oh, I haven't taken a bath in days. Do I smell?"

"No, not at all. You actually smell nice," she replied. What an absurd thing to say.

"Liar. This is perfect timing, actually. Let's take a bath."

"As you wish."

Together, we made for the baths. Unfortunately, the spring water had been disrupted by the eruption, so the dorm baths were out of order.

"Oh, curses!"

"There, there, Miss Claire. There, there."

In the end, I had Rae wipe my body down in my room. I let out a contented sigh, basking in the hot towel's warmth, and thought about what was to come.

There must be something we can do... Something...

Unfortunately, my thoughts only went in circles, and no way forward made itself apparent.

Interlude: Reminisce (Dole François)

V ERY WELL THEN. Does anyone object to the proposed Restoration Tax?" I asked. I waited a moment and met everyone's eyes, but everybody seemed fully on board. "Then let's call the session there. Gentleman, let us reconvene tomorrow."

After I called the session to a close, the parasites who'd taken the bait and joined my provisional government left, one by one. I watched them go with emotionless eyes.

Two men came up to me. One said, "That was splendid, Master Dole!"

"Hmph. I'm simply doing what is natural, given my position. Restoration is costly. We nobles are prepared to shed our blood, sweat, and tears to overcome this trial, of course, but the common folk must shoulder their share of the burden." I'd long since grown weary of all the vain attempts at flattery put on by these people, but I returned the man a cocksure grin all the same. I was accustomed to maintaining this farce. "I owe you two thanks, Count Ardouin, Earl Lelong. Your support for my proposal was a great help." I didn't even hesitate to dish out hollow gratitude.

"Oh, but of course we'd be in agreement with you, Master Dole! Why, we've always believed that there is no noble who has the kingdom's future in mind better than you!"

"Yes, yes, indeed!"

Despite what they said, Count Ardouin and Earl Lelong had originally been in Marquess Achard's camp. They simply tried to switch sides the moment Marquess Achard fell from power. Of course, I welcomed them with open arms, for they were deplorable politicians with no sense of morality or justice. All the better to fall to ruin with me.

"I do not deserve such kind words, but I thank you all the same. I shall take my leave here, if that's all right. Oh, and thank you for your financial contributions. I shall make great use of them."

Before I left, I made sure to thank them for their "financial contributions," which were nothing more than bribes.

"Yes, yes, absolutely!"

"Have a swell day, Duke François!"

The two continued to flatter me as I left the assembly hall. I felt a slight pang of guilt over having used what should be sacred ground in such a manner.

I returned to my estate and sank into a chair in my study, leaning back. My fatigue was mounting. While I was fully prepared to sacrifice myself alongside the rest of the corrupt nobility, I could not risk bringing the common people down with me. Handling the aftermath of Mt. Sassal's eruption would require everything we had to give. Rae's warning had allowed me to make some preparations beforehand, but the damage was far greater than I'd expected.

"Hmph. Those fools. How can they so blindly support the Restoration Tax? Do they know nothing of governance?" I mumbled.

Raising taxes now, of all times, was guaranteed to invite backlash. The nobles, in their corruption, saw the common folk as nothing more than obedient slaves. I looked forward to seeing the moment they realized their foolishness.

"... Having my own daughter look at me like that was quite painful, though."

Before the eruption, the king had ordered my daughter to investigate the aristocracy. She eventually denounced me, giving me, in the process, a look I would never forget. Seeing her ideals be betrayed had brought her to despair. I couldn't care less about the opinions of other nobles, but to have my dear daughter look upon me with such loathing hurt.

"...But it won't be much longer. Just a little while, Melia," I whispered, voice filled with emotion, to the photo frame on my desk.

In truth, I had not always been such a virtuous man. It was Melia who

changed me—she, who was virtuous in every way. Despite being born into the household of a marquess, she had managed to come away with a loathing for corruption in every one of its forms.

"May I have a moment of your time, Duke François?"

She had called out to me at a soirée. She didn't cower before me or my title in the slightest, but instead, openly criticized the nobility. As someone who had never thought to consider exactly what it meant to be a noble, I was awed by her.

For some time after that, we proceeded to have debates whenever we met. Others might have found our conversations unromantic and dull, but I was having the time of my life. It wasn't long before I proposed to her. She replied: "Will you shoulder my ideals with me?"

She was not a woman who threw the word "ideals" around lightly. To shoulder her ideals with her meant one thing and one thing alone—to stand against the corrupt bastion of the aristocracy. Was I prepared for such a thing back then? I don't know. But I was young and had no way of knowing the hardships to come, so I said yes.

Our married life was good. I fought for our ideals on the political stage, and she did the same in high society. We were even blessed with a child, whom I named Claire.

Claire was like her mother in many ways. Not just in appearance but in other regards as well. She grew a bit spoiled because of my reckless doting, but deep down they were the same. She was strongly aware of the fact that she was a noble and was strict with herself.

Of course, Melia was also strict with herself. The world of nobility was full of fiends, but she remained ever virtuous. Perhaps too much so. She publicly denounced Marquess Achard at a time when there were many ill rumors surrounding him but none dared to publicly stand against him out of fear of his status and influence. Melia was different from the rest, however, and chose to overlook none of his wicked dealings.

And then the incident happened. The whole thing was concluded to be a carriage accident, but I knew better—it had been an assassination, plotted by

House Achard. My memory of the incident itself was unclear, but I could never forget what Marquess Achard said to me when I returned to my duties.

"Ah, so you lived. Such a shame."

Not killing him in that very moment was both my greatest regret in life and the most important decision I'd ever made. I could have used my influence to have him secretly assassinated in turn, but I chose not to. I held myself to a higher standard. Returning to being the conceited noble I once was would make everything meaningless. It would make Melia's death meaningless. I chose not to give in to my rage.

It was only then that I *truly* understood the weight of the ideals Melia spoke of, and how cruel they could be.

I began to plan a different form of revenge. I decided I would purge the corrupt system of nobility as a whole. House Achard and the rest—all of it. That goal became the only thing I lived for.

Since then, I'd done much to make myself deserving of the things people whispered about me. Before I knew it, I'd become a villain to rival Marquess Achard. I committed wicked deeds but made sure I never fell into the grip of vice—though the temptation had anguished me numerous times. Now, at last, I was nearing my goal. It would take one more step... Just one more step.

"It won't be long now, my love. We shall meet again, soon."

As soon as I said those words, I thought better of it. Melia was virtuous and noble. A man steeped in sin, like me, was not meant for the pearly gates she'd passed through. Men like me were destined for hell.

"Ah. Perhaps I won't be seeing you again after all, Melia." The thought was a little...no, *greatly* disheartening. But I could not change my course now. I had to see things through. "At the very least...let Claire come out of this unscathed."

I had entrusted my daughter to Rae. Rae swore she would protect her, but I couldn't help but worry. Claire took after Melia greatly. Far too much, in fact. Would she allow herself to live on in disgrace?

"It seems I have no choice but to stake it all on you, Rae Taylor."

Rae Taylor was an enigma of a girl who claimed to be from another world. I found that hard to believe, of course, but her achievements were undeniable. She was different somehow, and she was slowly becoming someone irreplaceable to my daughter.

Perhaps she could change the fate my Claire was headed toward?

"...I could wish for nothing more." It was my wish that my daughter live on, not be martyred for her ideals. Seeing someone die for their ideals once was more than enough for me. "Melia... Please, protect Claire."

Her picture smiled at me. She could not answer my request. Of course she couldn't. But that was only a fitting punishment for a man of my sins.

CLAIRE'S POV

Protests broke out in the Royal Capital only days after the provisional government announced they would be raising taxes. I opened my dorm room window and looked out to see angry commoners marching down the capital's main thoroughfare with placards raised.

"Of course it came to this..." I sighed.

Most of the kingdom's crops had been ruined by the eruption. Merchants bought up all the food on the markets, causing prices to rise exponentially. Life had already been hard for the common man, and it was only going to get worse. It was no wonder they were taking to the streets.

"Will the rationing be enough?" I wondered out loud. Acting on Rae's suggestion, and with Yu's help, we'd been distributing rations and free meals to the needy. I'd received many words of gratitude from the commoners, but an equal share of hurtful words too. A major reason for their suffering was the very provisional government my father led, after all.

"I don't know, but let's do what we can anyway," Rae consoled. "I'm sure things will work out. And if they don't...at the very least, we should make it so we can look back and say we tried our best."

"You can be so hopelessly optimistic sometimes, Rae..." I closed the window

and sat down. Rae began making me tea. I didn't have it in me to be as optimistic about the future as she was.

"And you're too pessimistic at times. Looks like we balance each other out perfectly."

"...Perhaps so." I had to admit she was right about me being a pessimist. I often demanded perfectionism, but at the same time, I knew all too well where I fell short. My disappointment with my own performance had sapped me to the point where that pessimism was deeply rooted in me. There was always a voice within me telling me not to even bother trying because failure was guaranteed.

But Rae was different. She saw things for how they were and accepted that. For better or worse, she always kept her frivolous attitude. She never overestimated things, but she never belittled them either. Perhaps it was that power that allowed her to accept someone as hopeless as me?

"Miss Claire, are you thinking yourself into a negative spiral again? Your brow is creased with worry."

"... Nothing ever gets past you, does it?"

"Only when it comes to you. Now, have some tea and relax."

"I shall." I picked up the teacup and inhaled its sweet fragrance. "What a lovely smell."

"It's chamomile. It has a calming effect."

Serving such luxurious tea in the current economic climate would seem galling to most, but I knew this was actually something Rae had cultivated herself.

She'd predicted the coming crisis and rented out a flower bed here at the Academy to grow various plants.

"It's just what I needed. Thank you, Rae. I feel better now."

"...Do you really?" she asked, worry on her face.

"Pardon?"

"It's not like you to be this meek. You usually say something with more of a bite to it, like 'This is surprisingly tolerable, considering it was made by you."

"Excuse me? I'm capable of showing proper gratitude every now and then. The only reason I have to fuss at all is because you always say such crass, uncalled-for things."

"Is that right? Then maybe I should try saying some of those crass, uncalledfor things right now. Maybe it'll lead to a little bit of this, or a little bit of that..."

"I respectfully decline."

"Decline what, Miss Claire? Just what were you imagining? Perv."

"Wh-what?! I, but you...wha..." I grew flustered and annoyed, but then realized what she was doing. "...You're trying to cheer me up with all this, aren't you?"

"Aww. See, you really aren't your usual self. Normally, you'd play along like the gullible noob you are."

"I haven't a clue what a 'noob' is supposed to be, but I can tell you mean no harm."

"Oh, come on! You're no fun to tease when you're being like this!" She made a face and stamped her feet in irritation. My shoulders felt a bit lighter than before.

"Anyway," I said, "I believe today is the day we negotiate with the provisional government and the revolutionary government?"

"That's right. We will be meeting with Master Dole and the other heads of the provisional government in the morning, then Arla and the other revolutionary government leaders in the afternoon."

I was currently in a complicated situation. I was a noble with a lot of support from the commoners, so I became a middleman between the two sides to find a compromise. The problem, however, was that the wants of both sides did not mesh in the slightest.

The provisional government saw the revolutionary government as nothing more than a mob. They had no intention of hearing their demands and just wanted them out of the picture as soon as possible. On the other hand, the revolutionary government only saw the provisional government as something

they had to overthrow. They demanded nothing less than a full transfer of power as soon as possible. A compromise could not be found between the two groups. Rae warned me beforehand that this might be the case, but it was still disheartening, nonetheless.

The only way forward I saw lay in a theory made by a political scientist from Phrance. Some time ago, a revolution had occurred in Phrance that led to almost all of its nobility being killed. Grieved by the tragedy, the political scientist proposed the nobility might have lived if they had granted the commoners suffrage, the right to vote. I saw potential in the idea.

If we gave the commoners of Bauer suffrage, allowing them to influence government matters, the revolutionary government would be able to say they had succeeded and that their efforts weren't in vain. It would be a compromise on the provisional government's part, but this way of doing things allowed them to retain their status of nobility. Neither side would be perfectly satisfied, but this was the only compromise I saw that could be made... The only problem was that it was currently infeasible.

The provisional government would laugh at the idea of giving commoners suffrage, and the revolutionary government seemed hellbent on overthrowing the current government. There would be no attempt at a compromise from either side until things escalated and blood spilled.

"What do you make of things, Rae?" Realizing my thoughts were spiraling yet again, I sought Rae's opinion.

"Hmm... Personally, I don't think either side will relent until they take some damage. They're both too worked up right now, they'll get even more worked up once things get violent, but eventually they'll realize things can't go on."

"But it'll be too late by then!" Without thinking, I stood up and raised my voice. "If things turn to conflict, then it'll be the powerless who suffer the most —the women and children!"

There might be a few commoners who could use magic to defend themselves, but they were the overwhelming minority. One couldn't use powerful magic without a magic stone, and even the cheapest magic wand was prohibitively expensive for most commoners.

"We must end things before it reaches that point."

"All we can do is give it our best effort." Rae put her hands on my shoulders from behind, gently pushing me back down onto the chair. "I don't want to see blood spilled either, so let's just do all that we can."

"Will you help me, Rae?"

"Of course. Your wish is mine." She smiled, making my heart race slightly.

Looking back on things, however, I realize Rae was off at this moment.

Despite her smile, what she was really saying amounted to nothing more than a "Just do what you please."

Rae always thought ahead, anticipating events and planning countermeasures. It wasn't like her to be so dismissive. Her mind had already moved to other matters.

And like a fool, I put my full faith in her, suspecting nothing.

Weeks passed with us going back and forth between the provisional government and the revolutionary government. Both sides doggedly refused to concede anything to the other. Rae supported me to the utmost of her ability the whole while, not just helping me with her usual maid duties but also planning and formulating arguments to help convince both sides. I was truly thankful to have her.

Unfortunately, things reached a boiling point despite our best efforts. It happened on November 10, 2015 in Kingdom Years. The protests escalated into an armed uprising. Half the provisional government's army defected to join the revolutionary government as conflict began. Every newspaper reported things as being in the revolutionary army's favor.

"I was too late..." I watched the mob fight the kingdom's army from my dorm window, feeling powerless, useless, and bitter about it. I clenched my teeth. It was too *late* to do anything about it all.

"You did everything you could, Miss Claire. Things were just too far along to be stopped," Rae said.

"But if I had only tried harder..."

"You tried as hard as you possibly could." She tried to comfort me, but I was inconsolable. My head was full of what-ifs—what if I had started working sooner? What if I had found a better compromise? The thought of commoners, the people I had a duty to protect, being hurt this very moment tore at my heart.

And yet, I had no right to play the tragic heroine. I was a noble. If the times had chosen to move in this direction, then I had only one duty left to fulfill.

"Now that things have come to this, all that remains is for me to graciously admit defeat, as a noble of the old era."

The commoners had chosen to rid themselves of the nobility. It was our duty as nobles to accept the wishes of the commoners. House François was the most prominent of the noble families. Thus, as a representative of the nobles, it was best for House François to announce our time had come to an end before the damage on both sides mounted any further.

I was aware this would probably end in our deaths, just as it had in Phrance. The wrath of the commoners was simply too great. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't afraid of death. But I didn't want to go so far as to hurt commoners to cling to my position.

I was ready to accept the choice the commoners made. But Rae could not say the same.

"No, Miss Claire. You will stand on the side that denounces what came before."

"...What?" I couldn't believe my ears. I gave her a questioning look, making her straighten her posture. "Rae, whatever are you on about?"

"I'm saying you will stand in support of the new era and see off the old."

"You're being ridiculous. I am the daughter of House François. I am the quintessential symbol of the world that preceded this one."

Rae was talking nonsense again. Her expression was serious, however. This didn't seem like one of her usual jokes. "You aren't. Master Dole is."

"What's the difference? We're both François."

"There is a difference. Because you will be the one to spearhead the movement to convict Master Dole and the old ruling class—the nobility."

"Wh-wha...what are you saying?!" Upon finally understanding what she meant, I raised my voice. She wanted me to *forsake* the nobility. "You want me to depose the architects of the old era, then brazenly live my own life free of any connection to them?! Absolutely not! Never!"

I didn't want to die in vain either, but I still had my pride as a noble. There was no meaning in living a life of disgrace. I was just about to try and make her understand that when she said something I could never have expected.

"This was Master Dole's design as well."

"...Huh?! W-wait a second. My father?" I was in shock. Why was she bringing up my father now, of all times? Was he not one of the corrupt nobles who only acted out of self-interest? "I...I don't understand. E-explain yourself, Rae!"

"The one who put this revolution into motion was none other than your father, Master Dole."

Her words only made me even more confused. My father planned this commoner uprising? "I don't understand a single word that's coming out of your mouth!"

"Then let me start from the beginning. This'll be a long story, so please take a seat."

Despite how worked up I was, Rae remained calm. After she made me sit down, she slowly began to reveal everything.

"As you already know, our kingdom's government is corrupt. Most of the nobles only care about personal gain, vying for power with no intention of allowing meaningful change."

"...I'm aware. But I don't see what that has to do with this."

"There were a few nobles who still worried about Bauer's future. One of those nobles was Master Dole."

"My father? But he sidelined the royal family to take power himself..." I knew

this fact better than anyone else. After running back and forth between the two sides for weeks, it was apparent to me that my father didn't have the country's future in mind. He couldn't even consider what tomorrow might hold.

"Master Dole sacrificed himself to gather all the corrupt nobles in one place. He did so to ensure the commoners could finish it all today."

"...What? No, that's...preposterous." All my father's wicked actions had just been an act?

Rae continued. "There was a time when your father unquestioningly accepted the superiority of the nobility. That all changed after what happened to your mother, Melia."

"...After the carriage accident?" That day had left me with a deep wound that would never heal. Just what had it done to my father?

"It was no accident. The incident was contrived by another powerful noble. It was murder."

"No...!" I said in disbelief.

"That day, Master Dole decided things had to change. He continued to play the role of a corrupt noble while secretly supporting the revolution."

Then the father I knew and loved hadn't actually gone anywhere. Even now, he was still the same patriotic man I once knew.

"Do you remember the day I became your maid?" Rae asked.

"...I do. I recall you said something to my father, causing his demeanor to change."

"This is what I said to him at that time: 'Irvine Manuel, March 3rd, five hundred thousand gold.' That information pertained to the financial support Master Dole was secretly providing to the Resistance."

According to her, that was information only my father should know. The amount of monetary aid given to the Resistance's treasurer, Irvine Manuel. She'd hinted at the fact she knew about my father's secret plans to convince him to hire her.

"After everyone else was cleared out of the room, I told him I found his cause

admirable, but I was worried you would get caught up in it."

"Why would you think that?"

"Master Dole planned to sacrifice not only himself, but you as well, Miss Claire. He loves you from the bottom of his heart, but he had given up on saving the country any other way."

That was understandable, given our duty as nobles. Even after hearing my father planned to have me die alongside him, I held no grudge against him. If anything, I thought he was right to make such a choice.

"So I offered him another choice. I gave him an option that would let you live even when the nobles were overthrown. And he took it."

That must have been where the plan for me to split off from the nobles of the old world and oppose them came in.

"Everything up to this point was all to make this possible. We've improved your reputation, distanced you from the rest of nobility—all so you could live in the era to come."

"So, then—you! You knew this from the beginning?!"

I had trusted her. I had trusted her to the point life without her became unthinkable. She had stayed by my side to support me all this time...but it was all for a lie?

"Yes. I knew that the revolution would happen, and the result would be the downfall of the aristocrats. None of that could be prevented."

"But I—I trusted you!"

She closed her eyes and said, "I'm so sorry, Miss Claire. I will accept any punishment you choose."

She sounded so indifferent that I unwittingly raised my hand in anger. I swung my hand at her cheek...but I couldn't bring myself to hit her.

"...I can't believe you two."

Rae and my father had lied to me. A tremendous lie too. Not one I could easily forgive. But I wasn't so foolish that I couldn't understand why they did what

they did. They lied for my sake. They lied so I could live, even if the nobility met its end. It was a fatherly lie. It was a lover's lie. It was a lie that made my emotions overflow and stream down my cheeks.

"I want you to join the revolutionary government now. I've already arranged things with Arla."

I didn't say a word. Rae seemed to have everything planned out for me. She'd probably predicted all this a long time ago, accounting for each and every little detail.

"...Soon, the royal family will pass the Royal Standard to the revolutionary government. When that happens, the aristocracy will become the rebels. You will convict them."

But she forgot one important, important thing... *Oh, Rae. How could you forget...*

"...Miss Claire?"

I ignored her and stood up, nearing the window. Nothing had changed. The fighting still continued outside. "Hey, Rae? What sort of life do you think I would have if I became a commoner?"

It was an impossibility. But I still wanted to know what she thought.

"Well... At first, there will be a lot to learn. Like when you spent time at my house during vacation."

"Indeed." I nodded without turning around to face her. It hadn't been that long since I visited her family home, and yet it felt like an eternity ago.

"But you'll get used to it quickly. And I'll always be there to take care of you."

"I see... So you will live with me?"

"Of course. I'll work hard and do everything I can for you."

"Yes. I think I will need that."

The life she spoke of would be a pleasant one, I was sure. So long as she was there to support me, any life would be joyous.

"Let's get a dog," she suggested.

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"I prefer a cat."
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We would live a modest life.

"Maybe start a garden?"

"So long as I can grow some flowers."

A life humbler than what I knew, but peaceful.

"How many children should we have?"

"We can't have children."

"Then let's adopt."

"I want two cute little girls." I answered her questions, then paused. Eventually, I said, "I believe you would never let me be unhappy." But I was not meant for such a thing, Rae. "I..."

"Huh?" she said. My voice had been too shaky for her to hear. "Miss Claire?"

"I said I refuse. I refuse to join up with the revolutionaries." I turned around and looked at Rae head-on, my voice firm now. She seemed taken aback, making a face I couldn't help but find comical.

"What are you saying, Miss Claire? This is the only way."

"No. There's another way. I can choose to fall with the old era and my peers."

Rae, I understand well how you and Father feel. But this is who I am.

"No... It's pointless! That wouldn't make anyone happy!"

"No, probably not."

"Master Dole—and me too, we did all this for you, so you can live—"

"Yes, and I am grateful for that."

I was calm. Calm enough to put my true thoughts into words. It was all so clear to me now. *Rae...I...*

"Wait...wait a second. Are you angry with us for not telling you what was going on? Please, I apologize. But if we had told you—"

"I'm sure I would have refused."

I loved you more than I even knew.

"I know you and my father had my best interests in mind. I'm not angry."

"Then why?!"

"Because..." Forgive me, Rae. "... I am a noble."

She was at a complete loss for words.

I continued, "An aristocrat enjoys their stature and luxuries in exchange for acquitting their duties when called upon to do so. The reason I have been allowed to live such a selfish life is so I could, once more, when this day came, fulfill my duties."

"You don't have to! Not anymore!"

"No. I will see to my final obligation—and that is to submit to the will of the people, as an aristocrat and as a relic of the era coming to an end."

Rae...you were more than just someone I admired. You are my first, and only, love.

"Miss Claire, please think this through. Wouldn't you like to live in the new era together with me?" I could hear the sorrow in her voice.

"I'm so sorry, Rae. I cannot grant your wish."

"But you...you promised me. You said you wouldn't give up until the very end."

The days I spent with you were a treasure I wouldn't give up for the world.

"Ah, you're right. I remember that. It feels like so long ago."

"No...no... Miss Claire, don't leave me!" she begged me, like a child. So unlike her.

"I'm very sorry, Rae." I put my hand on her cheek, then gently...stole her lips. "To apologize for breaking my promise, I offer you my first kiss."

With this, I had no more lingering regrets.

"Farewell, Rae. Be well."

I departed the room then, leaving her in a daze.

Rae, Rae, my dearest Rae. I'm sorry. I cannot sacrifice everything for love like you. I won't ask for your forgiveness, but please...

"Live on in the new era."

Interlude:

Royal Academy Defense (Pepi Barlier)

The BACK GATES are about to be breached!" a soldier from House Kugret yelled.

"Don't falter! We'll stop them here!" Loretta yelled back. She and I were situated at the back gates of the Royal Academy to defend the school. The commoners' protest had finally escalated into an armed uprising. They grabbed kitchen knives, hatchets—anything they could get their hands on—and stormed the wealthier districts. The Royal Academy was not exempt from their rage, of course.

More than a thousand commoners were gathered outside the main gates trying to break in. Loretta's father, Count Kugret, took command of the provisional government forces. Loretta was assigned to protect the back gates, and I was designated as her aide.

"Pepi, you don't have to force yourself to stay with me if you don't want to." Loretta forced a smile despite her nerves. But those words weren't what I wanted to hear from her.

"Aren't you the one forcing yourself? Just say what you really think. You want me to stay with you, don't you?"

"Ngh..." She blushed red. Ever since the music festival, I'd been aggressively making moves on her. Her heart was still set on Claire, but I was making progress. I was sure she would be mine one day. For that reason, among many others, I couldn't let her die here today.

"C'mon, Loretta. Enough zoning out. The soldiers are awaiting your orders," I said.

"Oh, right. Squadron three, advance!"

The soldiers of House Kugret began moving on her orders. I admired how cool

she was for a moment but quickly focused. Now wasn't the time to fawn over her.

"Death to the nobles!"

"Freedom for the common man!"

I heard the commoners' angry shouts and began to think. Was our time over? Was the nobility finished? Yu had predicted something of this nature before, but I never thought it would actually come to pass.

This was really happening, though. The commoners were trying to overthrow us.

I don't care if the nobles are stripped of their status... House Barlier is already a thing of the past, anyway.

The incident with Marquess Achard had lost House Barlier its title. We were spared the death penalty only because of our efforts in helping convict Clément. My parents were currently relying on some influential people who lived in what had once been our territory. Despite being a noble, my father had always had the goodwill of the people in his territory, so he was able to count on merchants to help with expenses while he got back on his feet. Until then, I was in House Kugret's care.

That was why the nobility being deposed didn't bother me too much. But Loretta was the lady of a military family sworn to *protect* the nobility. She had a duty to do battle here—while I wanted to avoid her coming in harm's way, however possible.

Maybe I should knock her out and forcibly remove her from the battle...? I considered it, but it wasn't realistic. The battle was currently evenly matched. If I removed Loretta, the acting commander, the commoners would breach the gate and make escape difficult.

Ah, jeez! Then just what am I supposed to do? I felt like stomping my feet in irritation.

"The mob is only getting bigger! We can't hold them off forever!"

"Damn..." Panic showed on Loretta's face. I didn't blame her.

"Lady Loretta, please permit us to use offensive magic!"

"It'll only be a matter of time before they get through!"

"No!" Loretta had forbidden the use of offensive magic. If we used it, there was a chance we could win, but... "It is our duty to protect commoners, not harm them. We must hold out by using our magic only to strengthen and heal ourselves."

Once again, she ordered them to refrain from hurting the commoners. Perhaps she had adopted the same ideals as Claire...or perhaps it was our experience over the summer that changed her.

"Not good! They're breaking through the gates!"

Just as that report reached us, the back gates collapsed. The commoners pushed their way through the opening like an avalanche. The soldiers were swallowed up by the mob, which soon laid eyes on us.

Was this the end?

"Lady Loretta, please, permit the usage of offensive magic!"

"Never! If you call yourself a noble, then live as one until the end!" she yelled. She seemed prepared to face death.

"Well said," commented a wise voice.

A mist began to rise from the ground. It seemed to have a life of its own, moving to envelop the commoners, who began to go limp.

"Don't worry. They're just asleep."

"Master Kristoff!"

It was Kristoff. With a magic wand, he manipulated a magic mist and put the commoners into a deep sleep.

"You saved us, Master Kristoff!"

"No need to be so formal, Lady Loretta. I'm just a viscount now."

In the end, the only member of House Achard who was punished was Clément. It was customary to execute all blood relatives and servants for such an egregious crime, but House Achard simply had too much influence to be so severely punished. Rae likened the issue to being unable to close down a big bank, not that I quite understood what she meant. At any rate, the head of House Achard changed, and they were demoted to the rank of viscount. Kristoff was now formally known as Viscount Achard.



"Look out. There's more coming," he said. He pointed his wand toward some commoners who seemed a bit different from the rest.

"Adventurers!"

Adventurers were what we called people who undertook requests, big and small, for the adventurer's guild. Being familiar with combat, they were somehow able to resist the effect of Kristoff's mist.

"Let's get 'em, guys!"

"Yeah!"

Somebody who seemed to be their leader shouted, and a dozen or so adventurers charged forth. They were few in number but clearly more skilled than the other commoners, based on the way they worked in concert. They couldn't overwhelm us with numbers, but they could prove to be a bigger problem in another way.

"Please fall back, Master Kristoff!"

"Leave this to us!"

A young man and a young woman, not far in age from us, appeared before Kristoff.

"No, you two should be the ones to fall back," Kristoff said. "This is my fight as a noble."

"Nonsense!"

"We owe you, Master Kristoff! Let us repay what you've done for us!"

I would later learn the two people protecting Kristoff were orphans he'd saved from Clément's human trafficking. They could have lived out their lives as ordinary commoners, but they admired Kristoff's character so much they chose to serve him instead.

"...Hmph. You're all just children." The adventurer leading the charge, a man wielding a well-worn short sword, came to a stop upon seeing who he was up against. I recognized his face from somewhere.

"You're that man we met in Euclid..."

"Seems we meet again, Barlier girl."

"I don't mind fighting you, if that's what you want."

"Hmm, naw... I don't mind most jobs, but..." The man reached into his pockets and took out a heavy-looking bag. He tossed it toward the man who seemed to be their leader.

"Huh? What's this for?"

"Payment for breaching the contract. Should be three times my promised reward."

The leader scoffed. "The hell? Are you abandoning the job?!"

"I never would'a taken it if I knew it'd have me killing kids! An adventurer's got the right to pick what jobs he does, surely."

One after another, the other adventurers quit as well.

"Where do you guys think you are going?! These guys are nobles!" the leader yelled.

"You don't say. But y'know, this lady here may be a noble, but she's different from the rest. She cried for our fallen comrades before."

"That was probably just an act!"

"No noble would go so far as barfing just to put on a show. Right?" The man looked Loretta's way. She averted her gaze uncomfortably.

"You're pulling back?" Kristoff asked.

"For the time being. We don't want to see blood spilled either, if we can help it." The adventurer sheathed his sword. "Still...I get the feeling this revolution won't be done anytime soon."

"...As do I."

Though we had avoided conflict here, the battle was not going in our favor. Sure enough, the Royal Academy announced a full surrender to the revolutionary government not long after. As the children of nobles, we were placed under surveillance and confined to the Academy.

"... What's going to happen now?" Loretta uneasily asked.

"I don't know, but I'm sure things will work out so long as we're alive." I squeezed her hand, swearing to myself that I'd ensure we both made it through this.

CLAIRE'S POV

"Right this way, Lady Claire."

A soldier of the revolutionary government brought me to the out-of-use second building of the House of Lords, a historic edifice that had been designated a national treasure. The room the soldier led me to had a familiar face waiting for me.

"Claire..."

"Father!"

My father got up off the sofa, rushed over, and hugged me.

"I was so worried about you!" I said.

"I'm sorry."

I wanted to cry in his arms that very moment, I really did. But this was no time for tears.

"Please wait here in this room. Feel free to ring the bell if you need anything." Saying no more, the soldier left the room.

The room's fixtures were quite classy, as befitting a building used by the former House of Lords. The place showed signs of being abandoned for a time, however. There was dust here and there, and the furniture seemed comparatively cheap, as though hastily procured. The mismatch in quality between the fixtures and the furniture was jarring.

"I take it Rae failed, seeing as you're here?" my father asked. He avoided revealing any information with his question, instead probing to see how much I knew.

"She tried until the bitter end to follow through with the plan the two of you devised. But I have my pride."

"...How foolish." My father grimaced, as though that answer told him everything he needed to know. He tightened his embrace and said, "As a noble, I am proud of your decision."

"Thank you, Father."

In a pained voice, he continued, "But as a father, I cannot help but be disappointed. You should live freely, Claire."

"This is how I've chosen to live."

"Then I've forced a terrible life onto you."

"Not at all. I accept my fate as a noble. I'm fine with this."

I'd had a good life. There had been sorrow, but it was a blessed life nonetheless. I'd been born into a wealthy noble house, had a respectable and loving father, made good friends, and... I was able to meet you.

Rae. My beloved. Leaving her behind, alone. That was my only regret.

The door swung open without a knock. An out-of-place, cheerful voice called out. "My, my. You noble folk sure take defeat graciously!"

"Cardinal Lilly..."

"Call me 'Alter,' would ya? I'm not quite the Lilly you know." Lilly—or rather, Alter—gave us a sarcastic smile that would never have been seen on Lilly's face.

Alter was the black-masked assassin of Nur we had seen before. His true identity was the alter ego of Lilly, created by Salas's magic.

"Leave it at that, Alter. There's no point in explaining anything to these two when they'll soon be dead."

"Salas! How dare you show yourself here?"

"Ah, Dole. I'll miss you, you know. The world needs capable politicians like you."

"Spare me," my father spat.

Salas smiled calmly. "No, I mean it. I really do. Though, I suppose it's true I'll be more relieved than anything to see you gone. You always were a bit of a thorn in my side, weren't you?"

"Salas... Do you understand what you're doing? You're selling out your own people for your ambitions."

Salas sneered. My father, by contrast, maintained his earnest politician's face the whole time. He wanted to stop whatever Salas was plotting. It was my father who put the revolution in motion, but it was not in his design for the Nur Empire to take advantage of it.

"Why should I care about the people of Bauer? All my politicking has been for my own sake, not theirs. And I'll have both Bauer and Nur dancing in the palm of my hands soon enough," Salas said.

"...You're incorrigible. Not being able to bring you down was my greatest failure."

"Ha ha, say whatever you like. There's nothing you can do at this point. Or would you like to challenge me now, alongside your daughter?" Salas darted his red eyes tauntingly at us.

"Why you—"

"Don't, Claire. Ignore his cheap provocations. He may be weak, but the same can't be said for his experiment there."

"Heh heh. Why, how mighty kind of you." Alter bowed like a performer would.

"What do you intend to do with us then, Salas?" my father asked. "Hand us over to the Nur Empire?"

"No, no. Your heads aren't worth *that* much. I'll have you two executed as symbols of the old order."

Executed. The word made me grow pale. Belatedly, I realized how real this all was. I was going to die.

"Oh? Is something the matter, Claire? You've come a bit too far to start fearing death all of a sudden, don't you think?"

Salas's taunting was insufferable, but he was right. Suddenly, I was afraid of death. If I were lucky, I'd be beheaded. That would be over quickly. But I could just as well be burned alive. I trembled at the thought of the agony.

"No matter how brave you might pretend to be, you're just a child. You can't help but fear death. Perhaps I should be merciful and grant you an alternative." He grinned. "Become my puppet, like Alter, and I'll let you live."

"Wha—don't be ridiculous!" I shouted, incensed at the idea. I wouldn't work for Salas, no matter what terms he offered.

...But with my life hanging in the balance, I had to admit I found the offer ever so slightly tempting. As a noble, that hurt my pride.

He laughed, seeming genuinely amused. "Ha ha ha, Is that so? What a shame. Then I suppose you'll be departing this world, together with that haughty, noble pride of yours."

"...Talk about bad humor," Alter muttered under his breath.

I understood then that Salas had had no intention of letting me live. He just wanted to mess with me, the daughter of his old political enemy, as much as he could.

"What a waste of our time. Leave at once," I said with a scoff.

"Oh? Should you be taking such an attitude? I do believe your life is in my hands at this very moment."

"Claire is my flesh and blood," my father said. "She's prepared for whatever you throw her way."

"Is that right? The thought of death seems to terrify her, if you ask me."

"All people fear death. But a noble finds meaning in death, despite their fear."

I gasped at my father's words. I was, indeed, afraid of death. But would my death be meaningless? No. No, it certainly wouldn't. My death would help mark a new era for the commoners—one in which they lived under a government that treated them properly.

Rae was a commoner. My death would pave the way to a brighter future for her as well. Gifted as she was, I was sure she would get along just fine. No...I was certain she would thrive in the new world.

Gradually, my trembling came to a halt.

"Oh? Putting up a brave front, are we, little lady?" Salas teased.

"Say whatever you like. Your comeuppance will come sooner or later," I replied. My mind was calm now.

Who knew? Perhaps it would be Rae who'd deliver Salas's punishment. I believed she was capable of putting a stop to him and saving Lilly.

"...Hmph. How dull. That's enough, I suppose. Let's be off, Alter."

"Later then, you two. Don't do anything hasty now, ya hear?"

Salas left the room with Alter in tow.

"Are you sure about this, Claire? I'm sure you could easily escape if—"

"I'm sure, Father. My will is set."

I was ready. I might not have lived a long life, but it had been a life befitting a noble. Besides... Now I can finally apologize to my mother for that day.

My mother might be cross with me for dying so young, but I was sure she would praise me for staying true to my noble ideals until the bitter end.

"...I see. I understand." My father hugged me once more.

Several uneventful days went by. Salas dropped by to taunt us every now and then, but my father and I were hardly bothered at this point. I fought to keep my heart calm for my impending death, but...

"It's Rae Taylor! Stop her!"

Her arrival was more than enough to shake my resolve.

"...Rae?" I couldn't see her, but just hearing her name was enough to make my heart stir. I thought I had resigned myself already. I thought I was prepared to die so she might live on in the new era. I thought I was ready to spend my numbered days without her. And yet...

Rae...you came!

I hadn't eaten much these past few days, nor slept much, for that matter—perhaps because I kept seeing her in my dreams. I was at my limit, physically

and mentally, so I couldn't help but be excited at her arrival. I got up, about to burst through the door and break out of the room—then stopped.

I turned and saw my father's gentle but sad expression. My heated emotions cooled all at once.

...If I leave, my father will be all alone, I realized. Of course, he probably wanted nothing more than for me to go. But I could not bring myself to let him die alone.

"Father, come wi—"

"I'm afraid I cannot, Claire." He turned me down before I could even say the words.

"Why, Father?!"

"The people need something to make the end of our era feel real. My death is perfect for marking the end of the old world." He stood by the window and looked outside. "You are loved dearly, Claire."

His tone was hard to describe, a complicated mix of exasperation and envy. I neared the window and looked out as well. I was not surprised by what I saw.

"Rae..."

She'd come alone. Salas's private soldiers blocked her way, their bodies clad in magic armor. Her expression was one of desperation as she flung her magic outward like it was the last chance she'd ever have to do so.

"It's not too late, Claire. You can still go to her," my father said. His gaze remained fixed on Rae. I didn't say a word in response. I couldn't. He sighed. "I was ultimately unable to do so myself, but a life lived solely for the sake of love is by no means a poor life. I can shoulder the sins of the old world well enough on my own."

Feeling his gaze on me, I turned to look at him. On his face was an expression I had never seen from him before. "...Father?"

"I haven't been a very good father to you, have I, Claire?"

"That's not true!"

"No, it is. Ever since I lost Melia, I devoted myself to nothing but trying to bring down the nobility."

I couldn't make sense of what he was trying to say. Did he feel like he hadn't been there for me? But I'd never once begrudged him for anything.

He continued. "To that end, I've sacrificed many things. My beliefs, my ideals, my money, my pride...even my one and only beloved daughter."

"Please stop, Father. I understand very well why you did what you did. I've never once doubted you loved me." I grew up spoiled. I was a selfish noble, and I was not afraid to admit it. But I knew my spoiled nature was a result of my father's doting love.

"I raised you as a noble should, Claire...but I cannot say with confidence that I have raised you with the love of a father."

"Father..."

"I planned to have you die with me for the sake of my scheme, for crying out loud. Even a complete outsider like Rae could see plain and clear how wrong of me that was."

This was the first time I'd ever seen my father so vulnerable. He doubted the sincerity of his own love for me, and whether he'd been wrong to place his grand plan before my life. He'd probably never shared these thoughts with another living soul. He'd kept them bottled up inside for who knew how long, being tormented by them.

"...Father, could you please step away from the window for a moment?"

"Claire?"

"Quickly, please."

"...Of course." Though confused, he obliged.

...Rae, thank you for coming. I'm happy I could see you one last time before dying. I raised my magic wand up high. Salas hadn't had our wands confiscated. Perhaps he had predicted this far?

"Claire? What are you doing?"

"Light! Magic Ray!" Four beams of light shot from the François family crests I summoned. The light tore through the window and seared the ground of the courtyard, leaving a mark. Just past the point of impact, Rae looked up at me in a daze. I was certain she understood what I meant to say.

"Claire..."

"This is my choice, Father."

I watched Rae collapse to her knees. Manaria appeared out of nowhere, scooped up Rae, and fled with her in her arms.

"I, Claire François—beloved daughter of Dole François, Bauer's great Minister of Finance—shall meet my end in November of Kingdom Year 2015." Once Manaria and Rae were completely gone from sight, I turned around and faced my father. "Father, you were the greatest man Bauer has ever known, both as a noble and as a politician."

"Claire..."

"You were also the most loving father there ever was, and the greatest father I could have asked for."

"Oh, Claire..." He wrapped his arms tightly around me.

"It is my honor to die as a noble. This pride I hold on to is something I've inherited from you and my late mother. I wouldn't give it up for the world."

"Thank you, Claire. I understand what you mean."

My feelings seemed to get through to him. With all my love, my resolve as a noble, and everything else, I hugged my father back.

"You truly are Melia's child," he said.

"Of course. Let's go apologize to her together once this is all over," I said.

For a brief, brief moment, my father frowned. Before I could think much of it, however, his usual dignified expression returned. I assumed I'd simply been mistaken about what I saw.

"Indeed... She deserves an apology."

"Mother is kind, though. I'm sure she'll forgive us."

"...Yes, I'm sure she will."

There was a great commotion downstairs. I later learned Rae's raid had almost been successful. Salas's private soldiers were defeated, as was Alter. In a panic, Salas came by and announced our execution was being moved up.

My lingering doubts were gone. Rae should have given up after the message I'd just sent. My resolve should have been made clear to her. Manaria had come to take her away, and I was sure I could count on her to comfort Rae when I was gone. I could meet my end with no regrets now.

I wouldn't realize how wrong I was until much later. But for now, in this moment, I genuinely believed I was ready.

Interlude: Behind the Scenes 1 (Manaria Sousse)

A FTER RETURNING from Bauer, I was thrust straight into the frustrating mess that was my family's power struggle. The rotten nobles were fixated on predicting who the next ruler would be and which faction they should support to line their pockets as much as possible. They thought only of themselves, not their citizenry.

I was by no means a virtuous woman, but I was still royalty. I had little interest in tawdry politics, but I'd been raised to love my people. So when I returned to my country and saw it on the precipice of ruin, I did what I knew I must—I announced my candidacy for the throne. I was reluctant to return to this life, but I could not allow the people to suffer. As someone with the means to do what was right, I had a responsibility to take up the mantle. That was what it meant to be royalty.

"...But what is it that I can do?"

Having been exiled once, I received little support. The memory of my womanizing scandal was still fresh in the minds of the citizens. But I persisted in my campaign, promising to pass policies that would help the common man.

"Manaria Sousse, is it? Nice to meet you."

The tides turned when Sousse's largest newspaper interviewed me. Until then, they'd only interviewed the candidates higher in the line of succession for the throne. A young journalist named Bettina Ermini sought me out, though. It was surprising to see a woman in such a male-dominated profession. She wore black-rimmed glasses and had disheveled hair. At first, I was a bit unsure if she could write a proper article for me, but my doubts were dispelled in moments.

"Allow me to get straight to the point. Are you an ally to women?"

Even though she was speaking to royalty, she did not mince her words. She

possessed a biting eloquence that ran contrary to her slack appearance. My opinion of her reversed in an instant. She was the real deal, unlike the many journalists who were only capable of writing puff pieces. She was the kind who'd show up on the scene and drag the truth into the light herself, pen in hand.

Her questions were numerous and varied. Obviously, she asked about the scandal. But she also asked about what kind of government I hoped to run, what kind of person I was, and what kind of future I envisioned for Sousse. The interview took a whole five and a half hours, and she never let up once. It took all I had to match her pace.

Looking back on it, I doubt I'd ever talked about myself at such length to anyone else. Among the questions she asked were a few personal ones that I would normally have declined to answer, but I understood right away that she wasn't asking out of curiosity. She was asking so she could better paint an unbiased image of who I was as a person.

"Special Interview: Manaria Sousse and Her Vision for the Future."

Bettina's article caused waves. For what might have been the first time ever, the people of the kingdom truly saw me.

Opinion of me still remained divided, but I was being noticed far more than before. Gradually, more and more people began to praise the policies I proposed. I continued to promote myself but started soliciting the opinions of the people as well, incorporating their thoughts into my suggested policies and thereby winning the public's favor. It hadn't originally been my plan to take things in such a direction, but in hindsight, it was an obvious thing to do, and one that was far better received than I could have anticipated. I felt ashamed on behalf of the royal family—to think something as obvious as listening to the people's thoughts had never occurred to us!

The citizens were fed up with royals and nobles, neither of whom ever stopped to consider what the people wanted. Hence, their support for me grew stronger. My opponents, who could only try to slander me, began to fall by the wayside.

Months later, the previous king appointed me as ruler. The whole process was

more cut and dried than I expected. It was anticlimactic, really—but there was no doubt in my mind that it was what the people wanted, even though it resulted in some of my political opponents abandoning the country and drifting off elsewhere.

The responsibilities that came with leading a nation were great, but also more fulfilling than I'd expected. I've never had a child before, but I imagined raising one would be as similarly amusing as watching one's nation grow. Of course, I never voiced this thought, knowing it would invite backlash.

I focused for a time on reforming the internal government. Then one day, unexpected news reached me.

"Your Majesty! A volcano has erupted in the Bauer Kingdom!"

To honor the terms of our alliance, I began at once to prepare to send aid to Bauer. A chill ran down my spine when I learned the nobility of Bauer had put themselves in power by establishing a provisional government. They were trying to depose the royal family, all while continuing to ignore the people's wishes—and they were led by Dole François, of all people.

I couldn't understand why he would do such a thing—but I didn't have the time to try and consider his motives either. There were signs of the Nur Empire at work here, acting from the shadows. Prepared for the worst, I took the Sousse army and set out for Bauer.

Despite a few complications, we reached Bauer. Both the provisional and revolutionary governments seemed troubled by our arrival. I could understand the revolutionary government's hesitation, given they were secretly backed by Nur, but it was odd for Dole's provisional government to not want our aid.

I tried to meet directly with Dole to talk, but the revolution kicked off right then, with me as its direct witness. Dole was apprehended by the revolutionary government, and Claire surrendered herself shortly afterward. The unease I had felt only grew greater.

"Something's not right..."

It was strange to think Dole would both allow himself to be vilified and not try to help Claire. But it was even stranger to think Rae would not stop both of them.

I gathered information as carefully as I could. Eventually, I found Rae—just as she was in the process of trying to save Claire. Though she fought hard, Claire ultimately shot her down.

It was then that I understood: This whole revolution was *staged*. In all likelihood, it was Dole who planned it. Rae might have had a hand in things too. But it was ending with both Dole and Claire dying, and Rae wanted none of that, so she was trying to save Claire...and Claire had just made it known she didn't want to be saved.

Rae fell to her knees in a daze, staring at a broken window on the second floor of the government building before her. She was completely out of it.

"This way! Back Master Alter up!"

"Don't let her escape alive!"

There was no time to dawdle. If Claire would answer even Rae this way, then there was nothing *I* could do to sway her mind. The only smart decision was to get out of here.

I picked Rae up. She was surprisingly light. It was hard to believe this small frame had shouldered so much. Dole really could be as cruel as his daughter.

I carried Rae away to the inn the Sousse forces were using, but she was still out of it. I didn't blame her. She truly loved Claire. She had proven that to me beyond a doubt. Back then, I'd thought leaving Claire in her hands was for the best...but it seemed I was wrong.

It took days for Rae to come back to her senses.

"Lady Manaria...? What are you doing here?"

Her eyes, however, were still clouded with despair. I could see just how important Claire was to her.

To tell the truth, I was tempted. Part of me thought of taking advantage of Rae's vulnerability and making her mine. She was a captivating woman. I hadn't lied when I claimed to have feelings for her, back when we fought over Claire with the Scales of Love.

...But even if I did take advantage of her vulnerability and confess my feelings for her, what would be the point? A Rae without Claire wouldn't be the same. Claire was already an irreplaceable part of who Rae was. If I made Rae mine here, she would just be an empty husk. The Rae I liked was the Rae who was hopelessly in love with Claire.

So I decided to encourage her, instead. I narrowly succeeded, helping her regain the will to steal Claire back. That made it twice now that I'd had to play the bad guy to bring the two of them together. Good grief. Rae was such a heartbreaker, and she didn't even know it.

But this was fine. I was royalty. Love wasn't in the cards for me; that much was inevitable. The only thing I wished for was for the one I once loved and the one I considered a little sister to welcome the new era together, hand in hand.

Interlude: Behind the Scenes 2 (Lene Aurousseau)

AFTER WE WERE EXILED, a harsh world awaited my brother and me in the Alpes. Our family was able to use their connections to continue doing trade, but my brother and I were disowned, left with no one to rely on.

"We have to hang in there, Lene."

"I know..."

I understood this was a fitting punishment for what we'd done, but the two of us needed a way to make a living, regardless. After much asking around, we were lucky enough to find an inn willing to let us be live-in staff. The innkeeper was a cranky man, but he was kindhearted. My brother and I would never forget the debt we owed him for taking the two of us in.

At the inn, my brother handled customers and office work, while I cooked. My brother had always been the amicable sort, so he quickly got used to the work. I did my best too.

"...I'll write you a letter of introduction."

After some time, the innkeeper referred us to our next place of employment. Our original agreement had only been for us to work at the inn until we saved up enough money, so it was a stroke of fortune to have another opportunity land in our laps. What's more, he was introducing us to a famous, high-class Alpecian restaurant. I knew this was the time to go all out.

At first, all I did was handle odd jobs. I had to learn how the restaurant and people worked before I tried anything. My chance came soon, however. Once a month, the restaurant held a contest where the employees submitted their own self-made dishes. I took the opportunity to use one of the recipes I'd gotten from Rae.

"What is this flavor?!"

"I've never eaten anything like this before!"

What I made was shrimp and broccoli mayonnaise stir fry. Mayonnaise was still rather uncommon—even in Bauer, only Broumet had adopted it—so my dish was well received. The recipe was added to the restaurant's official menu, and I was put in charge of preparing the core components.

From there on, my streak of good luck continued. The shrimp and broccoli mayonnaise stir fry dish became an overnight sensation, bringing in a flood of customers. One was a wealthy gourmand by the name of Edgar, who was thinking of someday opening his own ideal restaurant. He offered me money multiple times to one day run that restaurant, but I dismissed it for a scam at first, thinking it sounded too good to be true. I had my brother, who was studying clerical work and Alpecian law, investigate Edgar a bit—and it turned out he was indeed a famous gourmand, and had invested in a number of chefs who went on to establish their own restaurants. My brother and I decided to take up Edgar's offer.

"We did it, Lene. Things are truly beginning for us."

"Indeed, Brother."

We named our restaurant Frater, meaning "siblings" in the old Bauer language. We thought of using the word for "lovers" instead but ultimately refrained. Our restaurant's name signified hope. We would not forget our past mistakes. We would work to grow past them.

Using Rae's recipes, Frater quickly became famous. Our most popular item by far was a dessert, crème brûlée. So many of my memories of Rae and Claire were bound up in this dish that it felt like fate for it to become our bestseller.

Another big factor in our success was the magic-stone-powered cookware that my brother created. Apparently, he'd gotten the idea from Rae back when we were still in Bauer. The new cookware allowed us to do more with less staff, and even sell our crème brûlée to other restaurants, greatly expanding our business. We also began selling the cookware as well. It was safe to say my brother was a big reason why we were able to make it as far as we did.

One month after we established Frater, my brother and I went to Bauer, which was where we were currently located. We had heard of the eruption of

Mt. Sassal, as well as the chaos in the kingdom that followed.

Under normal circumstances, exiles like us would never have been allowed to set foot back in Bauer. However, an organization calling themselves the revolutionary government came to us requesting financial support. We knew something was going down in Bauer, so under the pretense of doing business with them, we returned.

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"Well, this is..."

"...Just terrible."
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The royal capital had none of the beauty I remembered it for. Many buildings were visibly damaged by the volcanic eruption, but most harrowing of all was the lifeless look in the people's eyes. I had to do something to help them.

I ended up offering more financial support than the revolutionary government requested. I planned to make up the difference from my own savings, but my brother insisted otherwise.

"It is by His Majesty King l'Ausseil's kindness that we are alive right now. He may have departed this world, but I want to show my gratitude to him as well."

In the end, we decided Frater itself, as a business, would send financial aid. Unsurprisingly, the revolutionary government welcomed us with open arms for our donation. What was surprising, however, was learning more about their operations. Since we were donors, they were willing to give us detailed reports of their activities—which led to us learning Duke François and his daughter had been apprehended.

I thought I would pass out the moment I read the report. The revolutionary government was trying to bring down the nobility-based one. As things stood, Claire's life was in danger.

Canceling my support would've been easy enough, but by that point, the revolutionary government had enough funds to be secure without Frater's backing. And so, I stayed on the revolutionary government's side so I might continue to monitor them from within.

The days crawled by at a snail's pace. Even though I knew Claire might die, all I could do was keep watch and hope nothing happened.

Then one morning, a letter arrived from Manaria.

"Rae!"

"Hey, Lene. It's been a while... I'm sorry." The moment we reunited, Rae bowed her head low. She apologized for hiding her true plans and for being unable to stop Claire.

"You have nothing to apologize for. If you couldn't stop her, then I'm sure nobody could," I said. "Besides, it's not like you've given up, right?"

"...Right." I saw determination swell in her. She seemed ready to get Claire back, no matter what.

"Then let's work together."

"Yes, let's. Thank you, Lene."

And that was how I became Rae's coconspirator in her plan to save Claire while our restaurant, Frater, remained a supporter of the revolutionary government.

"Miss Claire..." Even now, I adored her. I considered her my mistress, and would always do so, no matter how much time came to pass. I understood very well why she was trying to die in this revolution, but... "I would rather you live."

As someone who once betrayed her, I might not have had the right to say such a thing. But even so, I meant it.

"Let's do this, Lene!"

"Yeah!" I wasn't alone. I had Rae, Manaria, and even my precious brother with me. "Just you wait, Miss Claire."

My desires thus united with Rae's, I awaited the arrival of the fated day.

Interlude: Behind the Scenes 3 (Misha Jur)

O F THE THREE ROYAL CHILDREN, the one furthest removed from the revolution was undoubtedly Yu. With the Harvest Festival incident we helped her pull off, she'd abandoned her right to the throne. Even after the country's government split into the provisional government and the revolutionary government, both sides kept their distance from her.

"It looks like Claire's making her move. I'm thinking I'll help out as well."

When Claire first told us she was going to begin helping with the rationing efforts—presumably alongside Rae—I didn't want Yu to get involved. She was finally at peace, after so many years of being forced to go through life in the guise of a gender she didn't want. I didn't want that peace to be disturbed.

Yu, of course, saw right through me and laughed. "There's no need for the frown, Misha. I may have renounced my bid for the throne, but I still care about my people."

She told me in her own words that this was what she wanted. She could be rather hard to pin down at times, but there was no denying that she was raised with the noble values of royalty.

We started helping with rationing efforts at once. The Church already opened soup kitchens in the winter anyway, so the whole process wasn't unfamiliar to us. Financing appeared to be a problem at first, but Claire and Rae provided plenty of funds sourced from who-knew-where.

Things eventually got worse than they'd already been, however. About half of the provisional government's army switched sides and joined up with the revolutionary army, the two sides then beginning to skirmish. Public safety took a turn for the worse, and the rationing provided by both governments was suspended. The needy came to us all at once for food. I suggested we stop rationing until things cooled down, but Yu stubbornly insisted we continue.

"Right now, the ones suffering the most are those fighting for neither government: the powerless common people."

She insisted we continue rationing for their sake. As a former noble myself, I was familiar with the idea of noblesse oblige. But what Yu had was something far grander. Perhaps that's just what it meant to be royalty.

If the revolution continued to intensify as it had, there was a chance the royalty would become targets alongside the nobility. Yu didn't seem to care about that possibility one bit, however. Nor did Thane, for that matter. The revolutionary government supported his ascension to the throne, but he didn't let that go to his head and still did all he could. Rod's well-being was unknown, but I was sure he was doing the same somewhere. The three of them all were doing what they could for the people. Perhaps, then, I ought to reconsider what I should be trying to do.

After some time, our financial support from Claire and Rae ceased. I became unable to contact Rae as well. Without money, we could not provide food. I thought we had hit the end of our road when Manaria and Lene suddenly showed up.

"You've done well to hold out this long. Let me lend you a hand."

"Lady Misha, let me do what I can to help as well."

Manaria brought a number of resources from Sousse, while Lene provided a small fortune she'd somehow procured. Thanks to them both, we were able to continue distributing food to those who needed it.

Even better—Rod eventually arrived on the scene too.

"Yo. Sorry I'm a little late."

His body was covered in wounds, but he still had his usual big, reassuring grin on his face. He'd been caught in the eruption, as we'd feared, but narrowly escaped death—albeit at the cost of losing his arm. He should have been on bed rest, but the sheer force of his pride as royalty brought him back to the capital after receiving only the briefest care from the village he saved.

Later, Rae joined us. Now we only needed Claire back before we'd have all the Academy Knights reassembled.

"Leave the soldiers on both sides of this mess to me. I'll cool their heated heads down," Rod said.

"I'll take care of exposing Salas's dirty workings. Rae, could you compile Dole's achievements?" I said.

"Of course."

"That leaves taking care of Alter to me, huh? I might be able to use Spellbreaker to free her from whatever spell she's under," Manaria said.

The day before the public executions, we all gathered to work out our plan. We were dead set on saving Claire and Dole, and not just for selfish reasons either. Of course, everyone here owed both Claire and Rae a lot. But we also believed Claire and Dole were both people the world needed, even after the nobility fell.

I could not save them myself. But I would watch and do what I could to make sure things went right.

An anonymous message reached us. It seemed Thane was doing what he could from where he was as well.

Our preparations were done. All that was left was to wait for tomorrow.

"...Say, when we were kids, we took day naps together a lot, didn't we?"

"We did. I remember it was always a struggle getting you to wake up."

That night, we stayed over at the place where the people from Sousse were lodging. As there weren't enough beds, Rae and I shared one.

"Rae?"

"Yeah?"

"...Are you worried?" She seemed kind of restless. I figured talking about it might help.

"Yeah. I'm a bit worried."

"I see..."

"But the thing I'm most worried about is how I'll make Miss Claire change her mind."

"That does seem like it'll be a challenge."

Claire had changed. When I first met her at the Academy so many years ago, she was your typical selfish and snobby noble. But she now bore the values of an old-fashioned noble, the very same values I saw in Dole. Out of pride and a sense of duty, she was welcoming her death. It would take a lot to sway her will.

"Lady Manaria suggested I hold nothing back and tell her I want her to live, but I don't know if that'll be enough..." Rae grinned wryly.

"It's not like you've held back with Miss Claire up until now or anything. Would that really cut it?"

"That's what I'm saying. But Lady Manaria keeps insisting it'd be enough."

"Is that so..."

Why was that, I wondered? Rae wasn't the type to conceal her true feelings. Of course, she could hide things when needed, like the plan she made with Dole, but when it came to her love for Claire, well...she wore her feelings on her sleeve. I swear, she whispered sweet nothings to Claire every opportunity she got.

Ah. But then again...

"Rae... Don't you think you're a bit too used to failure?"

"Huh?"

"I'm sure it's partly because of your past life's experiences, but I've hardly ever seen you flustered by a setback." And I was sure Claire would say the same. "Rae...to be in love is an unsightly thing."

"...What do you mean?"

"Well, to give an example... When you and Miss Claire came to us asking for help with the rationing efforts, I actually wished Lady Yu would turn you down."

"Whoa. That's quite a confession."

"Focus, Rae," I chided. She sulked and urged me to continue. "You always act like whatever's happening isn't a big deal."

"What? No, I'm not."

"You may not realize it, but that's how it seems to others. I'm sure part of why Miss Claire was willing to die for the revolution was because she thought you would be okay without her."

"Oh..." Rae went silent.

"...Rae?"

"That's certainly a novel idea."

"Pardon?"

"Oh, sorry. It's just that I've never stopped to think that might be how others saw me." She scratched her head awkwardly.

"I apologize if I upset you."

"No, not at all. What you said was a big help. Few people are lucky enough to have a friend as sweet and caring as you."

"How glib."

"Ehe heh."

Seeing her joke around like this, I figured she would probably be okay. "All right, let's get to sleep. We have an early morning tomorrow."

"Right. Good night, Misha. And thank you."

"You're very welcome. Good night."

The morning of the public executions was here.

"You ready, Rae?" Manaria asked.

"Ready. This time for sure, I'll make Miss Claire understand just how hopeless of a human being I am!"

"You'll what now?" Rod, overhearing Rae's reply, laughed. Yu and I were present as well, as were Lene and Lambert.

"Oh, you'll understand. I'll rescue my princess, not with grace or gallantry, but unsightliness!"

"You're not making any sense, Rae," Lene said with a sigh.

Rae was her usual chipper self. This unique brand of off-kilterness was similar to how she had declared she would accept Claire's bullying if it meant she would get her attention way back when we first enrolled at the Academy. I didn't know what to say to her then, but I did now.

"I'm glad to see you're yourself, Rae. Now go break a leg."

CLAIRE'S POV

"Let this trial by the people begin!" Like a performer on a stage, Salas loudly announced the trial's start.

My father and I had both been dressed in formalwear, our hands tied behind our back. The fact they hadn't had us come out in rags was likely meant to elicit further animosity from the commoners.

"Dole François and Claire François stand before you, charged with the crime of using their status as nobility to exploit the people!" Salas proclaimed. He acted as though he hadn't exploited the people himself. I had already fully accepted the fact that I was dying to help usher in a new era, but I didn't quite like that this man was the one who would be standing at the top of said new era. "What's more, they've attempted to seize power for themselves while the royal family was recovering! A heinous act!"

Angry shouts came from the crowd of commoners. I did not blame them for despising us. We nobility have done awful things, things well worth their ire.

The trial continued. Salas listed off our crimes and deemed us guilty on all counts. After finishing, he asked my father if he had anything to say for himself.

"I have nothing to say. I dedicated myself to the kingdom. If the kingdom is to fall, then I shall fall with it." My father was intent on playing the fool until the very end. He was certain to go down in history as a villain of sorts. He loved his kingdom dearly, yet he would be remembered in infamy. The thought tore at

my heart.

"He admits to the crime! There will be an execution!" On Salas's signal, a few soldiers entered. It was time.

My life had been a well-lived one, neither too short nor too long. It had both bad and good in it, and I could remember it all. But right now, only the happiness-filled days flitted through my mind.

The executioner who would bring the sword down on my neck asked, "Do you have any last words?"

"I do not. I lived a life of no regrets. Do what you shall."

"...Very well."

Without looking, I sensed the executioner lift his sword. I closed my eyes and, in my heart, said farewell one last time. *Goodbye, Rae.*

"I object to this trial!"

I heard a voice from someone I never thought I would hear again. Especially not here. With a start, I looked over to see a small-statured girl desperately trying to get past the soldiers.

"Guards, throw her out," Salas ordered.

"Wait," a man said. "That woman has been an invaluable contributor to the revolutionary government. You will not force her out."

"But, Lambert..." Salas said hesitantly.

I hadn't noticed at all, but the man who spoke up was Lambert, who should have been exiled from the kingdom. He had changed greatly. His appearance was roughly the same, but he seemed more unshakable now, like a firmly rooted tree. I was still left wondering why he was here when things kept moving along.

"I object to this trial. The true villain who exploited the people and put our nation into such a crisis is someone else!" Rae's voice rang as loud and clear as a bell. I never thought I would hear that voice of hers again. My chest tightened. "What is this idiocy? Who would you accuse of such crimes besides Duke François?"

"I will show you now. Lene!"

"Right here, Rae." Lene appeared beside Rae. What was going on? First Rae arrived, then Lambert, and now Lene—all three of them shouldn't be here. "Dole François is no traitor to his country. In fact, he is nothing less than a true patriot."

She began to list all of my father's actions, including his support for the revolutionary government.

"When Miss Claire, Rae Taylor, and Cardinal Lilly brought corrupt aristocrats to justice, Master Dole was secretly supporting and guiding them." She spoke boldly, acting nothing like the Lene I knew. She had changed greatly in the months we've been apart. "He has also donated funds to the Resistance under the name 'XX' since its founding." Wait, no, at this moment, her change wasn't what was important. What was she doing here? My mind still hadn't comprehended what was going on. "For those reasons, I say Dole François is a true patriot who would do anything for this country."

"Ridiculous! He still formed the provisional government, taking advantage of our lack of a king!"

"Are you in a place to make such accusations, Salas?" a cool alto voice interrupted.

"Lady Yu? But what are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing. After all, you're the real criminal here." Yu's proclamation made the crowd stir.

"Salas is the criminal?"

"Maybe Yu really did go insane."

"But she doesn't look insane..."

Everyone seemed bewildered. Yu's voice cut through all their murmurings, however. I was willing to bet Misha's magic was to thank for that.

"This man before you, Salas Lilium, is the true traitor to Bauer. He has been

working with the Nur Empire, trying to seize control of the country for himself." Yu's accusation was biting. A commotion swept through the crowd.

"What are you talking about, Lady Yu?" Salas said. "You still seem to be suffering from some manner of hysteria. You ought to return to the convent, where you can find some peace."

"Our investigation is already complete. Will you do the honors, Rae?"

"Of course." Rae took something shaped like a card out of her pocket. "This magical tool holds proof of all of Salas's dealings with the empire. Everyone, do not be deceived by him!"

With Misha's wind magic, the voice recorded in the magic tool was replayed at full volume for all to hear. Salas's guilt was now exposed.

"...You all leave me no choice." Salas took a whistle out from his pocket and blew into it hard. Its sharp sound pierced through the uproar of the crowd. Moments later, a group appeared—likely Salas's personal soldiers. "Take control of the situation."

The moment Salas gave the order, an explosion stopped the soldiers in their tracks.

"Not so fast!" an awe-inspiring voice said. "Sorry I'm late. But the hero has to make a dramatic entrance, right?"

It was Rod, laughing after being missing for all this time. His right arm was gone, but his old overbearing personality was still very much there.

"Just give it up, Salas. Most of your soldiers have already submitted to me. Just call it a difference in charisma."

"Ngh... You couldn't just stay dead, could you? You just had to get in my way..." Salas glared bitterly at Rod, who scoffed back. "But it's not over for me yet! Lilly!"

"Ah jeez. It ended up like this after all, eh?" Alter stepped out of the shadows with a dagger on his hip. He wore black leather armor paired with a black cloak.

"Kill Dole, Claire, and the royal children! With them gone, we can spin whatever story we like!"

"You make it sound so easy. I mean, I'll try, but..." With an annoyed look, Alter drew his dagger. The gray blade was wet with what looked to be poison.

Alter was strong. With how chaotic things had turned, he might be able to fatally wound someone. Just as I thought that, however, Manaria gallantly appeared before Alter. "Shame on you, Salas, for turning a girl into this! Spellbreaker!"

"Stop it! Stay inside! This body is mine, I tell you! Mine!" Alter screeched, as though fighting for control of his body with Lilly.

"Miss Lilly, come back to us!" Rae yelled.

"R-Rae—shut uuuuup!" Alter brandished his dagger and charged toward Rae.

I worried for a moment Rae would be harmed, but she surprised me by stepping forward and hugging Lilly. After a big twitch, Lilly went limp like a puppet with its strings cut.

"I...did it, Rae..." After saying that, she fell unconscious in Rae's arms.

"Now even Lilly has deserted you. This is the end, Salas!"

"Argh... Damn it all!" Salas spat.

Rae pointed her magic wand toward him.

"Rae Taylor!" he snapped. "Open your eyes!"

He still wouldn't give up. He cast his suggestion magic on Rae, trying to take control of her like he did with Lilly.

"Ha ha ha!" he cackled. "You will be my second Lilly—"

"You think I'd let that happen?" Manaria said. I looked to see Rae was herself again. "Once I learn how to counter a spell, I never forget. Pitiful." She aimed the tip of her magic wand at Salas. "This time it's truly the end, Salas Lilium."

It was time Salas paid the price for his actions. He was arrested by the government soldiers who had served him before.

"What's going on?"

"So, who's the bad guy here?"

"Who are we supposed to execute?"

Confusion rippled through the crowd. It started small, then gained momentum, building until the chatter was like rumbling thunder.

"Silence!" A voice drowned out all the noise. All at once, everything became quiet. "So Salas was a villain, then. So what?" The voice belonged to Arla Manuel, the woman who stood at the helm of the revolution. "You think we're just going to call the revolution off because of that?"

"We weren't manipulated into starting this revolution by anybody. This revolution has been a long time coming." Arla's voice was by no means beautiful, but something about it made one want to listen. Like my father, she had inborn charisma. "The nobility abandoned us. They left us to starve! I don't care what reasons there were, someone must pay for their crimes, and who better than these two elites of the nobility?"

Unlike Salas, Arla had no dirty secrets we could reveal. It was hard to argue against her.

"Down with the old world!"

"Kill the aristocrats!"

"Long live the revolution!"

It certainly didn't help that the commoners were on her side, their shouts only gaining in intensity. Rae tried to speak, but nobody cared to pay her any mind at this point.

But then a soft sound rippled through all the noise. At first it was too faint, drowned out by the voices of the mob. It slowly became heard, however, the soft, undulating tones washing away the anger of the people. It was the sound of Thane's harp. He stopped and spoke in a low baritone voice, bearing all the grace of a king. "My people. Listen to this girl, just this once. She has something to say."

Everyone—even Arla—went silent.

"Rae Taylor, what do you have to say?" Thane prompted.

"Thank you, Your Majesty." Rae addressed the crowd again. "My beloved countrymen, what is it you desire?" She spoke slowly, choosing her words carefully. I could tell she was focusing on her tone and expression as well. "Is it to kill nobility? I would think not. I believe what you truly yearn for is stability in your lives."

The crowd was perplexed. The majority still seemed out for blood, but some —a few—connected with Rae's words.

"Master Dole and Miss Claire have worked harder than anybody to bring peace to us all. What reason do we have to kill them?"

A man shouted, "But we, the people—"

"You are individuals before you are a group! You there, what is your name?" Rae questioned the man. He clammed up, so she moved on. "Then what about you, who threw the rock? Or you, next to him?" Another man went silent, so she continued. "You're all living, breathing people. Tell me *your* thoughts, not what you think the group thinks. Do *you* really want to kill Master Dole and Miss Claire?"

Nobody spoke up in opposition this time. Rae had craftily dismantled their mob mentality by reminding them of their individuality.

"Certainly, many nobles disregarded the needs of the commoners. But these two are different," she continued. It was clear the commoners were fully listening now. "If you execute these two today, will you be able to tell your children you did so with pride? Will you be able to tell them of the righteousness of the revolution?"

To think I had been the one to teach her to speak like this.

"And don't think I've got nothing to say to you, Miss Claire!" Rae said.

"...Huh?" I made a face like a pigeon hit by a peashooter, not having expected the topic to shift to me.

"If you're dead, then who will restore Dole's honor once peace returns?"

"W-well..." I hadn't thought of it like that before. She had me there. I hemmed and hawed, unable to answer.

"Does being a noble mean you have to take blame for crimes you didn't commit? Do you feel pride in sacrificing your life for nothing?!"

"Wait, Rae. Let me speak—"

"Why not live for me instead of dying for temporary honor?"

"...I'm sorry, but I—" I believed dying here to give the commoners closure was my duty as a noble. But Rae didn't approve.

"Shut up! Can't you just listen to what I want for once?!"

I felt my heart stir as she shouted at me for the first time ever. "Rae, I—"

"Shut up, shut up! How could you be so stupid?! I can't believe you!" She was in tears. The ever-aloof and teasing Rae, in tears. Her face was a sorry mess that was hard to look at, and it was all my fault.

What are you doing just standing there, Claire François? The woman you love is crying. Quit dawdling and go wipe her tears!

"Look...if you two are going to squabble, could you do it somewhere else?" Arla's voice brought me back to my senses. She made a face like she'd just swallowed a fly. "Someone get this girl out of here."

"No! I'm not going anywhere without Claire, not ever again. If Claire is going to die, then so am I!"

"W-wait, Rae!" I yelled.

"Augh!" Arla groaned. "All right. Fine, all right, stop with the screaming and crying. It's not like we can have an execution now, anyway."

"...Huh?" I said.

"See for yourself." Arla pointed to the crowd.

"Huh... I suppose if they're not nobles anymore, then it's not a real problem, I guess?" someone said.

"Miss Claire saved me from starvation, you know."

"She helped me too. The noble I served was corrupt, but Miss Claire found me a new post after she had him arrested. She saved my whole family."

The crowd's opinion had shifted. Arla untied the rope binding my hands and looked off into the distance. "The people have started thinking for themselves. I don't need to pull them along anymore."

"Arla..."

"My mission is complete. So long as the system of titled nobility is abolished, I don't care what else happens. I won't take your life. Most of you nobles probably aren't going to make it in this new world, anyway." Arla laughed. "I look forward to the day I see an ex-noble begging a commoner for a loan. Now, go on and get out of here. You can't welcome the dawn of a new era dressed in mourning clothes."

"...Thank you."

Together with Rae, still in tears, I left the courtroom behind.

"You really are impossible, you know that?" I sighed. In the nearby park, I made Rae sit on her knees in the grass, preparing her for a lecture. She looked like she had complaints to make, but she certainly wouldn't make them before me. "Do you realize how much trouble you caused everyone?"

Under her breath, she mumbled, "Uhhh, that's weird... Isn't this supposed to be the part where the rescued damsel showers me in love and gratitude...?"

"What nonsense are you muttering there?"

"Nothing!"

"Goodness, Rae. I just don't know what to do with you. You're always so reckless and—" I began lecturing her at length. Of course, I was just being bashful. I wanted to hug her right this very moment, to tell the truth.

It wasn't just Rae I was thankful to, of course. I was happy beyond measure that everyone had worked together to help me. If it weren't for my pride as a noble and my desire to look strong before Rae, I'd probably be on the floor in tears this moment.

"...Don't be too hard on her, Claire."

"Master Thane! I-I mean, Your Majesty!" I exclaimed. "Is the trial over?"

"It's been canceled, given all that happened. The trial was only for Salas to make a public example of you and Dole, anyway. The revolutionary government considers the whole thing behind them."

Rae spoke up then, seeming to remember something only at that moment. "That reminds me, Your Majesty. I forgot to thank you."

"For what?"

"Your harp. You were incredible back there."

"You truly were," I said. "Everyone was mesmerized."

"...Nonsense. I didn't do anything special. Playing the harp is just something I do to kill time," he said. He seemed to still not like being praised for playing the harp even though he was so wonderful at it.

"Who taught you to play like that?" Rae asked.

"My mother... When she was still alive, on her sickbed."

"Oh, I see." Rae paused for a moment like an idea had come to her. "Then I guess her love lives on in you through your music."

Thane's eyes went wide. I wondered what might be wrong, when suddenly a single tear streamed down his cheek.

"Y-Your Majesty?" Rae stammered.

"Your Majesty, is something the matter?" I asked, worried.

"...I'm fine...I'm fine, it's just...to think she's always been with me this whole time..." His voice was only a low murmur, but it was full of reflection.

I had liked Thane in the past. But having now learned what love feels like from Rae, I can safely say my feelings for him were never anything more than admiration. But that doesn't mean I didn't care about him. Seeing a long-held burden lift off his shoulders like this brought me relief.

I noticed my father watching us from a short distance away. He seemed like he still had some regrets, but he wore a look of relief as well. I could just imagine the words he might say: *So in the end, we failed to die...*

Indeed, Father. We failed to die. But I'm sure there is meaning to be found in

living as well.

"Hey, Rae, Claire. That was nicely played back there, not that I expected any less." Manaria arrived, accompanied by Lene.

"Miss Claire! It's been too long!"

"Sister! And Lene!" I was overcome with joy to see the two. I had thought I would never see either of them again. Lene seemed just as overjoyed by our reunion, perhaps because our last parting had been for what we thought would be life. She hugged me with tears in her eyes, and I began to tear up as well.

"Are you jealous, Rae? You're still welcome to be my wife," Rod said as he joined our growing gathering.

"I refuse."

"I know." He let out a roar of laughter. He was as cheerful as ever and would probably continue to be the way he was, never faltering, for as long as he lived.

"Rae... Miss Claire..." Lilly stood some distance away, a soldier on both sides. "I want to apologize."

"Oh, Miss Lilly... It's okay. None of what happened was your fault," Rae said.

"Rae is absolutely right. Salas used you," I said.

Lilly's split personality, Alter, was something made by Salas. All the blame lay on him. If anything, Lilly was a victim here.

"E-even so, what I've done was unforgivable. I will accept whatever punishment the people decree." I could tell her will was set in stone. That being the case, halfhearted platitudes weren't what she needed.

"Very well. Be sure to atone for your crimes, then."

"Miss Claire, that's a bit harsh..." Rae said.

I continued, "Once you've done that, come back to us. We will wait for you, as long as it takes."

Tears began to well up and pour from Lilly's eyes. "Thank you, Miss Claire. I hope I can fight over Rae with you someday again."

She was taken away by the soldiers then. I didn't know what her punishment

would ultimately be, but I truly wished her the best.

"This has become quite the party, huh?" Rod whistled as he looked at the assembled faces. He was right, of course. We had all three royal children now gathered, as well as Manaria, Lene with Lambert in tow, and even Misha.

"It would seem Lady Claire and Rae are blessed with good company," Misha emotionally said.

"Well..." Yu gently interjected. "Everyone here has been aided by Rae and Claire at some point. I think it's more appropriate to say their actions are what have brought us together like this."

Her words resonated deeply with me. Mother, are you watching? Together with Rae, I've done many things. I acted a bit rashly for a moment, but even a girl as selfish as I was able to make this many wonderful, wonderful friends.

"C'mon now, Rae. Wasn't there something you wanted to tell Claire when you saw her again?" Manaria took a teasing tone. I felt her push me from behind.

Caught off guard, I stumbled a few steps forward. Before I realized it, I was standing right before Rae, who had a serious look on her face.

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"Wh-what?"

"W-well... Actually, never mind..."
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"If you have something to say, say it."

The important things needed to be said right away as one never really knew if another chance would come. Sooner was better than never. I'd learned that lesson the hard way.

Of course, that lesson applied to me as well. I had nearly walked to my death. There was something I needed to tell Rae.

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"Miss Claire!"
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"Yes, yes, out with it already," I said curtly to hide my embarrassment.

She grabbed my shoulders and said, "Please marry me!"

It took a few moments for her words to process in my mind. When they finally

did so, I went as red as a tomato. Cheers erupted from the peanut gallery.

"You're asking me this n-now? In public? Isn't that something you're supposed to do when we're alone?!"

I hadn't the slightest idea how I should respond to such an unexpected proposal. Of course, I understood the actual act of responding was quite a simple matter: I merely needed to nod and say "With pleasure," did I not? But alas, even in such a critical moment, I could not swallow my pride.

"Really? Well, give me a redo anyway."

"F-fine. I'll make a special exception and allow it."

"A redo of this, Miss Claire."

"Huh?"

She drew close while I was still confused and gently stole my lips. My thoughts stopped a second time, and our surroundings went silent.

"I wanted a first kiss whose taste I could remember." She smiled impishly like she had pulled off a prank.

"Wh-wha, Rae, you are just so, so, so...! Rae, you are just so... You're always so...so *Rae*!"

"I didn't know my name was an adjective!"

When I came to my senses, I began gently pounding my fists against her. For some inexplicable reason she had this peaceful, enlightened look on her face. Honestly, she was just...just so *Rae*.

"You better make me happy, okay?" I mumbled.

"Huh?" Rae and everyone around us froze stiff.

"I-I said, you better make me happy!"

Everyone looked at me in silence.

"Wh-what? Say something, will y—"

Everyone around us broke out in cheers of celebration. I was too embarrassed to look anyone in the eyes when, suddenly, Rae took me by the hand and pulled

me into a trot.

"Where are we going?!"

"Anywhere! We can go anywhere, so long as we're together!"

I once gave up all hope for the future, but now a blank canvas stretched out before me. I had no idea what kind of future I would paint, but there was one thing that was certain: I would paint it with Rae by my side.



Epilogue

 $^{\prime\prime}$ \mathbf{W}_{000W} . So that's what was running through your mind back then."

"Hmph. I can't believe you hid such thoughts from me."

Several months had passed since the revolution. Rae and I now led a modest but peaceful life in the outskirts. Today she and I found out we both kept diaries, so we gave each other's a read out on the chairs of our house's terrace.

The past year or so from her perspective was quite a bit different than mine. I had only thought of her as a complete nuisance around the time we first met, but she was already head over heels in love with me. I wanted to curl up into a ball of shame just reading how I acted back then. I'm impressed she put up with me for so long, honestly.

"So, what'd you find most unexpected?" she asked.

I took my time to think before answering. "Your plan with my father, I suppose. That wasn't even that long after we met."

"Oh yeah, that. Man, it was a lot of fun plotting behind your back." She grinned like a mischievous little rascal. The two of them had kept their master plan a secret from me, but given how I was, I could hardly fault them for it.

"What about you, Rae? What was the most unexpected thing from my diary?" Rae said she had a way of seeing the future, including things that concerned me, so there was a chance there was nothing unexpected at all for her in my diary.

"Hmm, there's too much to narrow it down to just one thing."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah. Like for instance, you weren't ever *really* that much of a villainess, even when we first met."

"Oh...? Is that right?" It seemed she expected me to be more heartless and cruel, not the caring, upright noble lady I was.

"And I guess I'm surprised to learn Lady Pepi and Lady Loretta weren't just your minions."

"Of course not. The two of them are my dear friends, and don't you mistake it."

"My bad."

Some of what happened to Pepi and Loretta was also written in my diary. Rae didn't have a high opinion of the two, but that seemed to have changed slightly after reading my diary. It would be a problem if she couldn't get along with my friends, so it was best we cleared up her misunderstandings sooner than later.

"What you wrote around the time of the Amour Ceremony was pretty interesting, Miss Claire."

"Excuse me? I told you not to read those parts!"

"And by that you meant you actually *really* wanted me to read those parts, right?"

"How does that make any sense?!"

The Amour Ceremony ultimately pulled Rae and I closer together, but the whole ordeal was still embarrassing. I couldn't even recall the events without blushing.

"But, wow... You were already all over me back then, huh? I had no idea."

"Honestly, it's a wonder how you couldn't tell. Just how dense are you?"

"Sorry." She smiled a bit sheepishly. "Oh, right. Seeing how much you grew as a noble through your diary was pretty interesting."

"Ugh. I was such a child when we first met. Just thinking about it brings me grief."

There was a time I only thought of commoners as people to be ruled over. I even looked down on children for panhandling. Oh, how immature I was. Such was not befitting a lady of House François.

"But you grew. People are even calling you a hero of the revolution now, aren't they?"

"You embarrass me. Most of what I did was secretly arranged by you and Father. I've hardly done anything worthy of praise." I would not claim the accomplishments of others as my own. It didn't matter if I was no longer a noble; I still had my pride.

"There was one entry in your diary that I found strange, though," Rae said.

"What's that, then?"

"Did you have a roommate?"

"No? I've always lived alone at the dorm." Presumably, I was given special treatment as I was a duke's daughter.

"That's what I thought. But according to your diary, you had a roommate: a noble lady you've known since you were a child."

"Pardon?" That couldn't be right. There weren't that many people I'd known since I was a child. There was only my family, the head maid, Lene, and maybe a few others.

"It was definitely written in your diary that you had a roommate named Catherine Achard."

"Catherine Achard... So she was a lady from House Achard?" The name was unfamiliar to me, but for some reason hearing it made my heart race. I racked my brain trying to remember when a voice spoke up.

"Catherine? Oh, that girl?"

"Sister!"

"Hey, Claire. You two look like you're doing well."

It was Manaria. We hadn't met her since she helped us during the revolution, so it'd been a few months. But there were more pressing matters that came before celebrating our reunion.

"You know about this Catherine, Sister?" I asked.

"I do. That Catherine girl is, well...somebody who met a tragic fate."

"Oh dear. I'm sorry to hear that," Rae said.

"Oh, I don't mean like that. She's alive. But I don't think she'll come see you

two ever again." Manaria knew something, but she seemed to be thinking over whether to tell us. "She made the tough choice to wipe herself from your memories, and I'd like to respect that if possible."

"What? But—" I tried to stand, but she gestured for me to stay seated.

"I get it, Claire. I wouldn't want to forget my childhood friend either. But your memory of her includes tragic recollections as well. You might come to hate her if you ever remember again. Would you still want to, even then?"

Manaria's eyes were sincere. She was asking out of genuine worry. She wanted what was best for me, more than she cared to respect whatever Catherine's decision was. But even so...

"Tragedy, too, is something that lets us grow."

"Claire..."

"I've experienced a number of tragic events in my life, but there are none I can say I wish to forget. Even the painful memories are a part of who I am. And it should stay that way."

Memories were precious precisely because they weren't all of good times.

"I see. Then I won't argue further. Let me return your memories of her." She cast Spellbreaker on Rae and me. I felt memories rush back into me like a wave.

"Miss Claire!"

"I-I'm all right. I just felt a bit dizzy."

Rae caught me as I almost fell out of the chair. The memories I had lost were just that extensive.

"Catherine...why?"

"She did it because she couldn't forgive herself. You remember now, right?"

Catherine had approached my mother as an assassin, only for my mother to save her at the cost of her own life. The guilt she felt tore at her, driving her to erase herself from my memory.

"I'm going to look for her," I said.

"I'll come with you," Rae added.

"Good grief. I had a feeling things might come to this." Manaria pulled out a slip of paper.

"What's this?" I asked.

"It's where Catherine's currently staying. She lives out in the Alpes now."

"Sister! I love you so much!" I hugged her without a moment's delay, making her smile broadly. Rae seemed a bit displeased, but surely she could put up with this much.

"You better make your move sooner than later. She never stays in one place long."

"Let's start packing then, Rae. Call May and Aleah over too."

"Sure thing."

A few days later, Rae and I were aboard a carriage to the Alpes. I couldn't help but feel excited at the prospect of meeting Catherine again.

"You look happy, Miss Claire."

"Of course. Catherine is like a little sister to me."

"...Just a little sister, right?"

"Pardon?" Confused, I gave Rae a look.

She blushed and said, "You wouldn't happen to have any feelings for her, would you?"

"...Rae?"

"Yes?"

"Are you by chance jealous?"

"You bet I am, gosh darn it!" She began slamming her head against the wall of the carriage.

"Cut that out, you'll hurt yourself!"

"Ugh... I hate how clingy I am, but...it's also your fault for being so cute, Miss Claire..."

"You're talking nonsense again. I think of Catherine as a little sister and nothing more." *Honestly, this girl... What a strange thing to be bothered over.* "...Hee hee. But I have to admit, seeing you jealous doesn't feel all too bad."

"Sadist."

"Call me all the names you like. Hee hee. To think you would be jealous of Catherine." I teased her, making her sulk. "I'm only joking. The only one I love is you, Rae."

"Hmph."

"Oh dear... Come on, chin up already." I put my hands on her cheeks and planted a kiss on her.

"Who do you think I am?! A kiss isn't enough to win me over."

"Then what do I have to do to make you feel better?"

"...Gimme a lap pillow."

"...Very well." Exasperated, I tapped my lap.

"Yaaaay!" She happily laid her head on me.

"Is something like this really enough for you?"

"But of course! Claire's lap pillow is a special privilege, and only I have a right to it out of everyone in this world!"

"Well... I suppose that's true?"

"You better not let Lady Catherine do this, you hear?!" she insisted. She seemed giddy, like a child.

How cute. I watched her slowly nod off to sleep. To think this girl was the one to steal my heart. My, how cheeky for a commoner.

Bonus Story 1: Echoes of a New Era (Loretta Kugret)

S WEAT FORMED ON MY BROW despite the chill of January. The layers of volcanic ash I shoveled slowly gave way to the wreckage underneath. I was used to physical exertion, but this kind of labor demanded more of me than my military training ever did.

I inhaled deep to steady my breathing, and the cold air chilled me from within. Thinking it would be bad to catch a cold, I tightened the towel on my neck.

A whole month had breezed by since the revolution. Bauer was still unstable, leaving everyone to do what they could to survive. Both former commoners and former nobles alike had it rough. Commoners already lived in poverty, but things were only worse for them now with the shortage of commodities leading to prices rising. The ex-nobility lost their special privileges and many of their assets, leaving them floundering. I, Loretta Kugret, was of course one of the latter, being an ex-noble.

House Kugret had served as officers in the kingdom's army for generations. We used to be of a lower rank, but my grandfather saw the value of magic early on and actively encouraged the study of it while the traditionalists stuck with old-fashioned, non-magic means. The late King l'Ausseil's meritocratic plans came into effect around that time, allowing our house to rise in status unusually fast for a conservative organization like the army.

Of course, things were different now after the revolution. The kingdom's army still handled national security and public safety, but the structure was currently being revised. My father never did anything corrupt, but it was undeniable that he was an influential figure in the pre-revolution army. His position, and our household by extension, was in a difficult situation now as exnobility.

"Snap out of it, Loretta. You're blanking out."

A cute girl with peculiar hair that curled inward snapped me out of my thoughts. Pepi Barlier. She was a former noble as well and, for reasons, was staying at our home for the time being.

"Sorry about that, Pepi."

"Keep it together, will you? We're nowhere near done." She sighed and returned to shoveling. What used to be immaculate, uncalloused hands that never knew a day's work were now covered in dirt and grime. Even so, she hadn't complained once. That was just the kind of girl she was.

The two of us were working to restore the capital. The city was left covered in volcanic rock and ash in the wake of Mt. Sassal's eruption, leaving much work to be done. Pepi and I offered to help, which is why we were now working beside commoners—or rather, fellow ordinary citizens, as they now were.

That being said, we didn't offer to help purely out of the goodness of our hearts. As I mentioned, House Kugret was in a bit of a bind. Currying favor with the citizens like this was a tactical decision. Not that we didn't want to help out as well.

Most ex-commoners probably thought otherwise, but it was a fact that nobles were supposed to be self-sacrificing. We were taught from an early age, in fact, that selflessness was one of the hallmarks of nobility. Of course, the problem was that there were many nobles who forgot this and abused their privileges to instead indulge in depravity. Having been trained under strict military code, such behavior was deplorable to me. Perhaps it was only right that we were overthrown by the people.

Not that any of that really mattered. What I was actually trying to say was that it was originally our duty to serve the people, so this restoration work didn't come as a particular bother or anything.

Not being able to play the piano kind of sucks, though... I was raised to be a military officer, but I was still an ex-noble. I was trained in the arts, including the piano, a talent and passion of mine.

My family hoped for me to become Bauer's first female military officer, but I

actually wanted to pursue the piano. Piano was wonderful. The slightest changes in the way you played made all the difference in how you sounded. I became the center of my own world on the piano, a world I could manipulate however I pleased. There was nothing that could replace the sense of power and ecstasy I felt when I played.

But the piano was a noble's hobby, as well as a luxury. Now that I was no longer a noble, my piano was gone, and I didn't know when I might next be able to play. That left me saddened, of course, but I understood there was nothing that could be done. It would be nonsense for me to indulge in music while ordinary citizens were only barely scraping by. The piano could come later. As someone raised with the values of nobility, I knew better than to place myself before the people.

Of course, that doesn't mean I don't miss my piano... Once all the dust settled, I wanted to take it up again. Even as I worked now, I took care not to injure my fingers. The call of the piano was just too great to ever give up on it.

I bet a good part of that is my last performance being so great.

The last time I played piano was before the revolution, around the time we cornered the corrupt noble Clément Achard.

I glanced Pepi's way. The two of us played together in the autumnal music festival. She was a violinist who played a more precise and technical style, in contrast to my free-spirited style. We were polar opposites in that regard, but we meshed surprisingly well together in practice. I would challenge her, and she would one-up me in kind. Like that we would compete with one another, taking ourselves to higher and higher heights. I found the moments we played together to be sublime. I could not forget the exhilaration I felt, even now.

I wonder how she feels... Pepi was behaving the same way she had before the revolution. Her household had lost its status because of Clément's actions, not because of the revolution, so in a strange way, the revolution hadn't really affected her. She'd been raised with the same old-fashioned noble values as me, so perhaps she was helping with the restoration efforts out of a sense of duty too.

Then maybe I'm the only one who feels so lost? Pepi and I weren't just friends

anymore. We were in a relationship now. Or at least, we were supposed to be. Ever since the revolution began, not a single thing of note had happened between us.

I mean, I get that now is not really the time to be worrying about that kind of stuff, but still... I was a girl of age. Having a significant other made me feel butterflies and what have you. Even if we couldn't flirt out in the open, I at least wanted to be able to do stuff together when no one was around... Oh jeez. How embarrassing.

Is she fine with things staying like this? Pepi wasn't the type to reveal how she felt that much. She acted careless but could actually be quite the schemer. She was also more easily hurt than her carefree attitude let on. I loved how complex she could be, but it did leave me unsure what to do in times like this.

Maybe she doesn't fully trust me yet. I originally liked another girl, Claire François. Even just remembering her name made my heart stir. Claire was a noble among nobles, as well as my first love. I now understand my feelings for her were more of adoration than of love, but crushes didn't so easily fade. Perhaps Pepi sensed my lingering feelings for Claire and was bothered by them?

"Hey, Pepi?" I said.

"What's up? You've stopped working."

"I, uh...never mind." I felt like she would slap me if I asked her if she really loved me. It was wrong of me to doubt her feelings, anyway.

"How are you two gettin' along? I see you're working up a sweat." A deep, throaty voice called out to us. Pepi and I looked over to see a familiar roughlooking man.

"Oh, you're that one adventurer," I said.

"Well I'll be, you remembered me. But I guess a lady of House Kugret would have perfect memory," the man joked. We had fought undead in Euclid with the man and had been near enemies during the revolution.

"Please. I'm just a normal citizen now."

"Is that right? Well, I suppose a noble lady wouldn't be shoveling ash, now

would she?"

"Are you here to mock us?"

"Not at all. Just here to say work's done for the day. The overseer's been trying to tell you guys for a while now, but it didn't seem like you two could hear."

Pepi and I had been too focused on our work, it seemed. Well, I was more lost in my thoughts than anything, but yeah. "Oh, I see. Then I suppose we shall take our leave."

"Oh c'mon, don't be such a stranger," he said. "How about we get something to eat, huh?"

The adventurer was inviting the two of us out for a meal. How daring.

"I'm afraid I have to decline. I do not feel like sharing a table with a commoner," I said.

"Ouch."

"Wait, Loretta..."

"Pepi?" Just as I was about to turn around and walk away, Pepi stopped me.

"You said it yourself. We're no longer nobles. What's the problem with us eating with our fellow citizens?"

"What? Pepi, what are you say—"

"Times have changed, Loretta," she chided. I felt like she had become distant all of a sudden.

"I don't mind going with just the Barlier girl, if you'd rather not come," the man said to me. He grinned vulgarly. In retrospect, he probably had no ulterior motives, but I somehow convinced myself at the time that I had to protect Pepi from this man.

"No, I'm coming too!" I said. I didn't even realize he'd played me.

"Then it's settled."

"...What is this?"

"What do you mean? It's meat. You know what meat is, right?"

"I know what meat is, thank you very much!"

The man brought us to an inn often used by adventurers. It looked like a pretty beat-up place to me, but I could see it being fancy by commoner standards. A number of places damaged by the eruption had already been patched up. This particular establishment probably had some pull in the community, to be among the first buildings to be fixed.

We sat ourselves down at the counter. The tables were full of citizens drinking themselves silly after a long day of labor. We had no choice but to sit at the counter to escape the smell of cheap booze.

A large-built, muscular man who seemed to be the innkeeper greeted the adventurer like a familiar face. The adventurer greeted him back and quickly ordered for us. We were soon served what was clearly ungarnished cooked chicken. There was no sauce to speak of, and I could only smell the faintest traces of seasoning. To call this food was blasphemy against the culinary arts.

Pepi and I gawked at our plates, but the adventurer said, "Just close your eyes and give it a bite. If you don't like it, they'll make it on the house."

"I'm not so shameless that I'd deny them their livelihood..." I grumbled. That said, I didn't even know how I was supposed to eat this. Even if I'd had a knife and fork, I wouldn't know where to begin with such a rustic meal. There did seem to be some paper wrapped around the leg of the meat, but...no, surely not?

"You just grab the leg'ere and tear into it, like this." The adventurer demonstrated for us by biting directly into the chicken.

"How vulgar," I said, horrified.

"It tastes best like this, really."

"Loretta, let's do what we must," Pepi said.

"...Right." I lifted up the meat, ready to complain to no end if it was awful, and took a bite. "...Hm? It's actually good?"

"How...? It's just cooked chicken, isn't it?"

"Ha ha ha. Surprised? This place serves good food. Their chicken legs, in particular, are just unforgettable." The adventurer spoke proudly.

The chicken looked plain, but it was actually quite well prepared. Not much seasoning, to be sure, but once I bit into the meat, I found it rich and flavorful. It was fresh and tender, with none of the chewiness or gamey quality chicken often had, and juicy enough that I almost expected to see it dripping all over me. It was the perfect remedy for an empty stomach after a day of labor. Appealing on an instinctual level.

"I'm flattered that a former noble like yourself finds it to your taste," the innkeeper said.

"You can tell I used to be a noble?" I asked.

"Course. The way you eat is different. Only nobles act with such grace." He laughed gently.

"This meal is really wonderful," Pepi said. "I mean it. This might be the best chicken I've ever eaten."

"Thank you. I'm very happy to hear that. It makes it worth waking up early every morning to prepare this."

I felt the same way as Pepi. I'd had finer chicken in terms of meat quality, but none as tasty as this. I'd turned up my nose at it for being food made by an excommoner, and for looking crude, but I could see now that it had been cooked with love.

"The liquor here is pretty good too," the adventurer said. "Hey, get us three of the usual."

"Sure thing."

"Hold on, I never said we'd drink," I complained.

"Come on, Loretta, we might as well. It's his treat," Pepi said. "Right?"

"Ha ha, sure thing, let's make it my treat!" the adventurer said. He and Pepi seemed to be really hitting it off, which kind of bothered me. Pepi didn't have a thing for him, did she...?

"You really wear your heart on your sleeve, huh, Kugret girl?" the adventurer said.

"Wh-what?"

"I'm saying you're a little simple, girlie."

I raised my voice. "Are you making fun of—"

"Loretta, stop. Don't cause a scene," Pepi chided.

"...Hmph." I was miffed. The two were getting along and I felt like I was just a third wheel.

"Cheer up, lass. Here, your mead." The innkeeper brought us our drinks, seeming to take pity on me. I calmed down a bit at the knowledge not everyone here was out to tease me.

I reluctantly picked up my cup and drank. "Oh... It's good."

"Right?" the adventurer said.

I had thought Broumet made the best mead, but what I just drank undid everything I thought I knew about the drink. The inn's mead lacked the high-class taste of Broumet's, certainly—I'm sure many nobles would knit their brows at it—but its strong fragrance and full-bodied flavor was unlike anything else. It was so unlike Broumet's mead that it felt wrong to even lump them together in the same category. It was like a whole other liquor entirely.

"Surprised? This mead here was made by the up-and-coming Frater," the adventurer said.

"The same Frater that makes crème brûlée?" I asked.

"Oh, that's an ex-noble for you. You're on top of all the trends, I see."

"I didn't know they did mead, though."

Unlike Broumet's mead, Frater's was meant to be savored slowly. It paired well with the chicken leg.

"I apologize for my impoliteness earlier, adventurer," I said. "I was wrong. The food here is excellent."

"The name's Gray, not 'adventurer.' Remember that for me."

"Sure. Let me introduce myself properly as well while we're at it. I'm Loretta Kugret."

"And I'm Pepi Barlier."

"Nice to meet you two. You know, *ordinary* people don't talk so stiff. Feel free to loosen up a little." He let out an energetic laugh.

More food continued to arrive. Everything was unique and delicious, and the liquor and conversation was good. At some point I forgot about my worries and simply enjoyed myself.

"You can be such a blockhead, Loretta."

"Huh?"

Pepi's comment came out of the blue. Quite some eating and drinking had been done by this point. I was comfortably drunk, but not to the point I was out of it. The innkeeper had carefully spaced out the alcohol with softer drinks in between.

"What's that supposed to mean, Pepi?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. You're a blockhead, blockhead." She gave me a look, then took another swig of her mead. Now that I was looking at her, I could see her eyes were starting to glaze over and her face was red. She was drunk. Not much of a strong drinker, it seemed.

"Something 'bout Miss Loretta here bothering you, Pepi?" Gray asked.

"You bet there is! We finally began dating, but she won't make a single move. I'm about fed up!"

"Wh-wh-wha, Pepi, do you hear yourself?!" I exclaimed.

"Now hold on, let's hear the girl out," Gray said.

Pepi continued. "I'm over here doing all I can to pretend like her each and every little move doesn't send my heart racing, but it's like she doesn't even care we're in a relationship! I'm sick of it!"

"Whoa, sounds rough."

"Don't egg her on, Gray!" I chided. "And you, Pepi, I think you've had enough to drink for one day."

"Nooo, I'm—I'm nnnnot drunk!" she slurred. "Loretta, you just don't get how charming you can be, you know that?!"

It didn't seem like there would be any stopping her. Helpless, I watched as she started to drunkenly ramble.

"You've always had a bit of a tomboyish appearance, but you've only grown more handsome of late. And the way you smile is just downright cheating. Do you enjoy making a mess of my poor, poor heart?"

"Like you're any better! You can be so careless with the way you dress sometimes! Do you have any idea how badly my heart races when I see the bare nape of your neck?!" Realizing I had to get on her level, I downed my drink and ordered another. The liquor wasn't strong by any means, but I felt my inhibitions fade regardless. "And the way *you* smile is just downright cheating! I let my guard down because I expect one of your usual carefree smiles, but then you hit me with a *real* smile and send me reeling!"

"Oh, I'm carefree, am I? If I look that way, it's only because I'm trying my hardest not to be a burden on you because you're always trying to look out for me!"

"Hey now, don't you think you two are gettin' a little heated?" Gray interjected.

"Shush it, Gray," I said. "I don't need you to put up a brave front for me, Pepi. I'm your girlfriend! You should lean on me more, rather than pushing yourself.

Or am I not dependable enough?!"

"You just don't get it, Loretta! Not one bit! Can't you see that if I start to depend on you I won't be able to stop until I've spoiled myself rotten?!"

The other customers had noticed us shouting and were watching us like we were tonight's entertainment. The two of us didn't notice, being off in our own little world at this point.

"The girls sure are openly flirtin', eh? You think maybe people are more accepting of this kind of thing now?"

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"I dunno about that. Sure would be nice, though."

"Why's that? You want to do the same?"

"...Shut up."

"Heh, that doesn't sound like a no."
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Some conversation was being had in the peanut gallery, but their voices didn't reach us.

"Grow some guts already, Loretta!" Pepi shouted.

"Oh yeah?! Guts to do what, then?!"

"Guts to, I dunno, marry me or something!"

"I've been ready to marry you from the moment I fell in love with you, you idiot!"

"Huh?"

"Uh..."

The onlookers began cheering all at once. How embarrassing. I'd said something stupid in my drunken stupor. But it was too late to take back my words. I downed the remaining mead in my cup and, with my face burning red, hugged Pepi.

"Once our lives have calmed down a bit, let's get married, Pepi."

"...Okay."

The sight of her smiling at me, tears in her eyes, was the last thing I remembered from that night.

"Ugh..."

"Heya. Finally awake?"

The place was silent when I woke up. The boisterous customers from earlier had cleared out, and the lights were all down except for the one by the counter. Gray and the innkeeper were still here, drinking together in the faint glow. To my side, Pepi slept peacefully with a blanket on her shoulders.

"...What happened?" I said groggily.

"You drank a bit too much. Don't worry, your stuff's all paid for."

"...Sorry for the trouble." My head felt heavy. I tried to pick up Pepi but found I lacked the balance.

"You're not going anywhere like that," the innkeeper said. "Stay the night. I'll lend you a room on the second floor."

"Oh, I really shouldn't impose..."

"You sure about that?" Gray said. "It's dangerous for you to head home as you are. All the more so for Pepi there."

"...I suppose you're right."

"Here's the key. The room will be the one at the end," the innkeeper said.

"Thank you, innkeeper. And you too, Gray. Tonight was nice."

"Glad to hear it. Have a good night now," Gray said.

"Good night," the innkeeper said.

"Good night." I focused on my balance as I made my way upstairs, carrying Pepi in my arms. I was using magic to strengthen myself, but my drunkenness made my concentration sloppy. It took all I had to not drop her.

"I was worried where the kingdom might be headed from here, but looking at those two, I get the feelin' we'll be all right."

"I couldn't agree more."

I was too distracted to hear the conversation of the adults behind me, but the clink of their cups did reach my ears. The sound echoed through my mind—a sharp "La" on the music scale, the first for this new era.

Bonus Story 2: Things Passed On (Melia Larnach)

Rain Poured over ME as I lay there, unable to move. The moment I understood I wasn't long for this world, memories overflowed within me. Perhaps this was my life flashing before my eyes.

With difficulty, I moved my gaze to the side and saw a man reaching out to me.

"...Melia!"

Oh, Dole. My beloved Dole. I am truly blessed to have met you.

I was known as the "Iron Lady of House Larnach." House Larnach was the household I was born to, headed by an earl. I was not very expressive as a child, but I was a quick learner. From an early age, I excelled in studies, etiquette, and magic. I was particularly good at using magic to fight, able to go toe to toe and then some with even the soldiers of the Royal Guard. As many found it ridiculous for a woman to wield such skill in combat, I was called the "Iron Lady" in mockery.

I always struggled to connect with others. I enjoyed talking to people, but the conversations were always one-sided. Being the daughter of an earl, I was never by myself—but even so, I felt alone. I threw myself into the glitzy world of high society and met many people, but even then, found few outside my family whom I could open up to.

Everyone I met would claim I was too fastidious. I considered my values normal for someone raised with the strict guidance befitting the daughter of an earl, but the other nobles I met called me inflexible. This went both ways—I, in turn, found them lax and couldn't understand how they neglected their duties so.

If I were more experienced in interacting with others, then maybe things would have turned out better. Unfortunately, my time spent with other people did nothing to heal my sense of solitude. In what felt like no time at all, I'd grown convinced I would never find someone who truly understood me. I resigned myself to that fate. Even so, I swore to live true to who I was and be a proud Bauer noble. I grew even more isolated from others in the years to come, but I stopped caring.

At some point, a change in my relationships with others occurred. It began when I met three men. The first man was l'Ausseil, eldest son of the royal family and the man expected to be the next king of Bauer. He and I were able to connect over talk of a merit-based society.

"Melia, I do not believe people are meant to be divided based on the circumstances of their birth."

The concept of judging people based on ability instead of social standing was a dangerous idea that could shake the very foundations of the aristocracy. It was impractical and terribly idealistic—and yet, it fascinated me. L'Ausseil and I met numerous times to discuss the feasibility and merits of his plans. He was already engaged, so our relationship never veered into the romantic, but for a time, he was the man I was closest to.

The second man who changed my life was Clément Achard. He was a citizen of Bauer as well, and hailed from a household that held the title of duke. He was a number of years older than me but always made an effort to talk to me in social settings.

"As a lady, you could do to conduct yourself with more grace."

Clément was, for better or worse, your stereotypical old-fashioned noble. As a woman who fought with magic and debated politics with men, I was always rebuked by Clément for how unladylike I was. I would argue back, of course, never failing to earn a disapproving frown from him. Strangely enough, he never grew tired of having the same exchange again and again.

The third man to change my life was Dole François, the man I would eventually marry. He was a shrewd man who inherited the title of duke at a young age and acted as the kingdom's Minister of Finance.

Our first meeting was far from cordial. At the time, the Bauer nobility were starting to show signs of corruption. Many nobles took advantage of their position to line their own pockets instead of working for the kingdom's people like they were meant to. This was, at its core, an issue of money. I questioned—no, *interrogated* Dole on his opinion of the Bauer nobility, as the Minister of Finance.

"Hmm... How very interesting."

His reply was short and simple. The look on his face was one of genuine interest. Even l'Ausseil seemed bewildered by me when we first talked, and Clément, of course, only ever had frowns for me. I worried Dole might be too naive for his position. He was already well into his twenties at the time, but he still felt green. Was a man like him really fit to be Minister of Finance, especially with all the vultures circling the treasury?

The four of us would often meet when the occasions arose. L'Ausseil would quietly listen to us speak, I would bicker with Clément, and Dole would try to calm us down. Things continued this way for years. For the first time, I felt as though I had gained friends.

Of the three, Dole captured my interest the most. He was the first man I developed a romantic interest in. One time, the two of us went for a stroll in town. We were talking and greatly enjoying ourselves when a boy bumped into him, falling to the ground. The boy was clearly a commoner. Any other noble would have scolded him severely, but Dole instead reached out to help the boy up.

"It's good to be lively, but take care you don't hurt yourself."

A woman I would assume to be the boy's mother ran over and apologized profusely before leaving with the boy as fast as she could. The boy, not quite aware of what was going on, waved goodbye to Dole, who smiled back. I stared at him, awed.

"Is something the matter?" he asked.

"That was a commoner. Are you not cross with him?"

"Not at all. As a Bauer noble, I consider all Bauer children something like my

own."

From that moment on, I knew I wanted to spend my life with him.

The pleasant friendships I shared with I'Ausseil, Clément, and Dole changed greatly once l'Ausseil took the throne. He quickly became preoccupied with business and stopped appearing at social functions. He had the talented and renowned Salas Lilium supporting him as Chancellor, though, so I was sure he would get along fine.

"I miss the time I spent with you three," he told me once with a wry grin. He seemed to be struggling with something private, but as he was king and I but an ordinary noblewoman, I could not pry. The most I could do was support his Queen, Lulu, as best as I could.

"I've made the necessary arrangements to take you as my wife."

Things with Clément grew even more complicated when he sought my hand in marriage. Having thought he disapproved of me, I was shocked by his proposal. My parents were elated at the idea of me marrying into a duke's household, but I was more bewildered than anything. I couldn't grasp what he was after. There were rumors, of course. House Larnach had ties to Sousse royalty, so some thought he was trying to utilize our influence for himself. Others thought he was trying to antagonize Dole, who was increasingly becoming a political enemy of Clément's. I never did figure out what Clément was really after.

Marriage was a contract between two households. By all rights, I should have married Clément for my family's sake. I did not dislike him, despite what our bickering might have caused some to think. Unfortunately, my heart was already set on another.

One night, I visited Dole alone. At this point it was already widely known that Clément had proposed to me, so when I arrived at the François manor, Dole scolded me.

"Do you realize how bad it looks for you to visit another man's house this late? This could affect your marriage."

Seeing the cross look on his face, I only grew more certain that what I felt for

him was love. It was my feelings for Dole that made me hesitate to marry Clément. Before I knew it, I had moved in to kiss him. That face he made then was one I would never forget.

"The one I want to marry is you," I said.

I did something unspeakably daring then to force his hand. When we woke up in the same bed the next morning, I asked him to take responsibility. Together we went to the Achard manor to announce our marriage to Clément.

Looking back, it might have been all my fault that Clément ended up the way he did. After having his proposal rejected in such an awful manner, he began antagonizing Dole and me at every turn. He'd been by no means a perfect noble before, but he'd had the sense to not cross the line. After Dole and I were wed, however, he descended to new lows of corruption.

"Clément... It is a shame things had to come to this."

l'Ausseil, unable to overlook Clément's actions, was forced to punish him, downgrading his title from duke to marquess. Clément ceased to publicly harass us from then on but continued to behave in corrupt ways behind the scenes. There was no doubt in my mind that it was my fault he'd ended up like that.

I was stricken with guilt for some time, but eventually, that passed. I was too preoccupied to linger on the past. My marriage to Dole was going smoothly, absent of trouble. We were both in good health, so it was only a matter of time before I was pregnant. Dole and I both worked hard to welcome our coming child. Though I still felt bad about what happened with Clément, this was more important. Our discord had nothing to do with my child.

By this point in time, the political stances of our original group of four were clear. L'Ausseil continued to follow his ideals of a meritocracy, Clément was your archetypal conservative, and Dole and I were progressive idealists. L'Ausseil preached plans to support commoners while Chancellor Salas did what was necessary to actualize them, Clément opposed the plans, and Dole and I voiced our support. Things between the conservative and the progressive factions gradually grew more and more heated. Eventually, it became commonplace to see houses in good standing ruined overnight.

House Achard and House François came to lead the conservative and the

progressive factions, respectively. Clément and Dole's influence grew to a point where many of the other nobles would wait for their opinion on matters before daring to speak. Meanwhile, the tension between the two houses only grew with each passing day. Dole worked hard on the political stage, while I did my best to do the same in high society.

The only reprieve from our difficult lives was the birth of our daughter, Claire. Of course, raising a child was difficult as well. For an idealist like me, Claire was the cold wakeup call of reality. No matter how lofty my ideals were, they meant nothing before her cries. Raising her was hard work, but Dole and I got through it by working as a team.

Oblivious to our struggles and worries, Claire grew up quickly. Dole spoiled her terribly, and I admonished him for it numerous times, but he never did stop. I wanted to spoil her myself, to tell the truth. It wasn't fair that I was always the one stuck scolding her. I complained about this to her wet nurse, our head maid, but she replied that that was what it meant to be a mother.

Alas. Our lives were turbulent. But I was strangely happy.

"Mother!"

No matter how many times I scolded her, Claire always happily leapt into my arms. Sometimes she would cry after I lectured her, sometimes she would need to be cheered up after making a mistake with her dance, and sometimes she would come running to our bed because she was scared of the lightning outside. But no matter the occasion, I always found my worries blown away by her wholehearted, pure love and trust in me.

Claire turned four today. The maids and I prepared a wonderful party for her, but before we could celebrate, a letter arrived. The sender was Clément Achard. He was inviting us to a discussion with many other influential nobles, several of whom had signed the letter as well, making the invitation difficult to ignore. It sounded like many members of the progressive faction had been invited too, and the letter mentioned something about the conservative side being willing to make a compromise. As the leader of the progressive faction, House François *had* to attend.

"No, you can't go! Today's my birthday, you two have to stay with me!" Claire protested with tears in her eyes. She so often had to endure Dole and I being absent. She hardly complained, but we knew it was tough on her, so we'd made an effort to plan for us to spend her birthday with her.

"Claire, don't cause problems for your mother. As nobles, we must put our duty first," Dole said with a guilty look. I'm sure he would have chosen to stay with Claire in a heartbeat if he could.

"But I'm always putting up with you two being away... Can't I have you here on my birthday?" Claire said through tears.

I felt like my heart would tear in two. Shaken, I thoughtlessly said, "I'm truly sorry, Claire. I'll make it up to you, I promise. Oh, I know! I'll buy you a birthday present, anything you want. What would you like, dear?"

She froze stiff, before yelling, "I don't need your presents! I hate you, Mother!" She then ran away to her room.

"Oh, Claire..."

She was too young to understand a noble's duties. We tried explaining it to her a number of times, but some things were simply beyond a four-year-old's comprehension.

"She'll understand one day, Melia," Dole said. "The responsibilities of a noble come before all. Even before family."

"...I know. But sometimes I can't help but wonder if Claire might have been happier if she were not born a noble." Perhaps Claire was meant for a life of freedom, not one of duties and ideals. Either way, it did not matter now. I could not turn down Clément's invitation.

"Lene, please look after Claire. Cheer her up if you can," I asked.

"I will try. I wish you both safe travels."

Our new maid, Lene, was a favorite of Claire's. I hoped she would be able to cheer Claire up and asked her to do just that. She accepted, but the look in her eyes seemed to fault me for my choice not to stay. I did not blame her.

"Let's be off, Melia. For Claire's future," Dole said.

"Let's."

There was a chance today could bring an end to our political divide. Dole and I steeled our wills and departed, intent on making sure Claire's tears today wouldn't be in vain.

"What a waste of time..."

"That was nothing more than a get-together, wasn't it?"

Dole and I could only sigh despondently on our way back from the Achard manor. What we were told would be a discussion to find middle ground between the conservative and progressive factions turned out to be a mere social gathering. There were no political discussions to be had, only insubstantial, trivial talk that barely touched on the issue. To think we'd made Claire cry for such an inane event... Dole and I were livid to say the least.

"At least we were able to leave early. We should be able to make it back in time for Claire's birthday," Dole said.

I didn't reply, as my mind was elsewhere.

"...Melia, is what happened still weighing on your mind?"

"...It is."

"We did what we had to. Clément may be a political opponent, but he is still a high-ranking noble. We couldn't refuse his invitation, even if it was sent at the last minute. Especially not with how he framed it."

I knew Dole was right. We had no choice but to go. Even so, the image of Claire's tearful face was seared into my mind.

"Hey, Dole? I—"

Just then, there was a great impact against the carriage.

"Melia!" Dole covered me with his body, putting himself in danger in the process. There was a moment of weightlessness, then a mighty thud.

By the time I regained my bearings, the two of us had been tossed out of the carriage. My arms and legs hurt, but I forced myself to stand and assess the

situation. It appeared we had collided with another carriage and fallen off a cliff. Our carriage was broken, with Dole and the coachman lying nearby. The horse lay on its side, braying, with what I presumed was a broken leg.

My consciousness was fading. I looked down and saw my thigh had been pierced by a broken shard of the carriage. I was bleeding profusely. It was clear I would die if nothing was done, so I seared the wound shut with my fire magic.

I looked around and saw four figures approach from the darkness of the surrounding deep forest.

"...I take it this is no accident, then," I said.

They were all clad in black. They looked like children, but the way they moved told me they were trained. In their hands were knives.

"Quit while you still can. You'll only be throwing your lives away," I warned.

I put up a magic barrier to protect Dole and the coachman, both of whom were unconscious. The barrier was the physical type, so it would remain for some time, even if I were to die. The two of them would be fine for now. I needed to think about what to do with the children.

I couldn't let my guard down, even if they seemed young. Assuming this was Clément's doing, these were no ordinary children. I tore the hem of my dress to free up my movement, then pulled out a magic wand.

To my surprise, the children began to fade from my sight. They seemed to have magic that obscured them. But I had ways around that.

"Flame Blossom!"

If I couldn't see them, then I simply needed to attack in every direction. I sent fire blazing all around me, landing a hit on one and knocking them down. That left three.

"Give it up. You have no way of defeating me."

I went on to take down two more by relying on sound, but the fourth continued to evade me.

"...Perhaps they gave up and ran away?" I wondered out loud. I continued to remain vigilant and guard Dole and the coachman.

At some point, it began to rain.

"There you are!" Noticing a gap in the rainfall, I fired off a fire arrow. The moment I hit them, they and the other three children became visible. It seemed this fourth child had been the one using the magic.

I pulled down their black hood and was shocked by what I saw. "Such a young child... Clément, how could you?"

The child, unconscious and drenched with rain, couldn't have been much older than Claire. To be forced to commit such violent acts at such an age... It was terrible. I was sure Clément was the one behind this. There were rumors he had a hand in human trafficking, and it was hard not to imagine these children were a part of that.

"Just you wait. I'll make sure you're free soon."

I laid the child down and went to check on the others. I had held back some, but there was no knowing where I had struck them. I couldn't use healing magic, so I planned to just give them basic first aid. But as I neared the first child

"What?!" A hail of ice arrows rained down on the children and me. "How... could you?"

I'd taken a good deal of damage, but I could still move. My assailant saw that, however, and rained down ice for a second, then a third time. I tried to intercept the attacks with a spear of fire, but the number of ice blades was too great for me to stop. Everything in my surroundings, including the children, was skewered through. The child with the obscuring magic had her leg pierced and was bleeding profusely. I used my fire magic to staunch their bleeding.

"Clément...why?!" Did he hate Dole and me that much? Enough to kill these children who bore no fault of their own?

Only one of the child assassins was still breathing. Swearing to myself that I would at least make sure she survived, I played my last gambit.

"Ngh..." After enduring countless ice arrows, I pretended to take a direct hit and fell to the ground. After some waiting, three men emerged from the darkness.

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"You get her?"
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I needed them to come just a little closer. Then I could end this without the child getting hurt. The wound on my thigh had reopened at some point. I felt my consciousness fading with each moment. *But I can't give up...*

I sprung up and launched spears of fire at the three men. The action brought me swiftly to my limit, and I fell to the ground once more. I couldn't check to see if my strikes had landed, but as the minutes ticked by, no follow-up attack came. It seemed I'd been successful. But this was the end of the line for me.

"Why... Why save me?" The child assassin who'd survived roused herself and looked down at me. There was confusion on her face. She probably wanted to know why I had bothered to help her. Great big eyes looked at me from under her hair, hair the same color as Claire's.

"What is your name, child?"

"...Catherine."

"I see... Catherine... I suppose I saved you because I consider all children of Bauer something like my own." That was what Dole had once said. It was the way I believed all nobles should be.

Catherine looked at me with eyes full of shock. "But...but I—"

"It's fine, dear... The truth is, I have a little girl around your age myself. A cute, willful little girl." I reached out and patted her hair, wet from the rain. "She has the same honey-colored hair you do. She's strong of heart but becomes saddened easily. I'd be happy if you'd be her friend."

I was able to say that much before I lost the fight to stay conscious.

Forgive me, Dole, Claire. I'll be departing this world before you, but at least I was able to live as myself to the very end.

It would be a lie to say I didn't regret leaving the two of them behind. But

[&]quot;Looks like it."

[&]quot;Hmm... It doesn't look like this barrier can be dispelled."

[&]quot;Get up, Catherine. Hurry up and erase the evidence."

even so, I believed what I had done would one day find meaning.

Dole, Claire... I love you both so very much.

Dole must have woken up at some point, for he was crawling toward me in the mud, ruining his best clothes. I flashed him a smile...and then I knew no more.

"I had no idea such a thing happened to you, Lady Catherine."

"Enough of that, Emma. Lend me a hand here."

The two of us happened across a village while I was on my self-imposed exile. The village was having monster problems but was too poor to hire adventurers, so Emma and I took it upon ourselves to help them out. The monsters were nothing special. Even Emma would have been able to handle them alone.

"Thank you so very much. Your help is duly appreciated." The village chief thanked us, bowing his head deeply after we returned. "It's not much, but please, take this."

He offered us a reward, but I had no intention of taking it. "Use that money for the village instead," I said. "If that's all, then we'll be on our way."

We left, Emma pushing my wheelchair onward. All the exercise had made me rather hungry, so I was eager to leave.

"Lady Catherine, why did you not take his reward?"

"I haven't the right, Emma." I would be bearing this cross for the rest of my life. I had to atone as much as I could. "Plus, a certain woman's selflessness is still vivid in my memory."

There was once a woman who protected me, a complete stranger who had tried to kill her only moments ago. I had no right to try and carry on her will. That was for Claire to do. But if it was at all possible...

"...I want to be like her, if only a little bit."

Bonus Story 3: Misunderstanding (Claire François)

So the thing is...Rae and I got into a fight."

"Oh my. How unusual."

Some time had passed since the Bauer Kingdom's revolution. I sat across from Lene in a restaurant meant for ordinary citizens, not nobles. The building had been damaged by the eruption of Mt. Sassal, but Lene's business—Frater—had financed its restoration. The interior was tidy, and the chairs and tables—also supplied by Frater—were all neatly arranged.

Frater mainly operated in the Alpes, but they were thinking of expanding business to Bauer as part of the restoration efforts. For both moral and financial reasons, it sounded like a good plan and a wise move on Lene's part. She was staying in Bauer for the time being to help with restoration efforts.

As for me, I lost my status of nobility and was rendered a common citizen. Or at least, common enough. People seemed to celebrate me as one of the key figures of the revolution for some reason. That aside, I worked behind the scenes with the new government to draft their new constitution, acted as a middleman between citizens and government, and was kept overall quite busy these days.

Rae made herself useful in her own way. Being a dual-caster with high aptitude in earth and water magic, she was often called upon to help with restoration efforts. Her earth magic could be used to remove volcanic ash and rock, as well as restore buildings; and her water magic was crucial for healing the wounded. These days, she was often seen running this way and that around the capital with a mana potion in hand.

As a result of our new busy lives, Rae and I hadn't had much time to spend together. We'd made our feelings clear to one another and were planning to have a wedding ceremony one day with people from our inner circle present,

but as one would expect, not being able to see each other much had put some strain on our relationship. Things wouldn't be so bad if we talked it out, but instead, we were both pretending not to be stressed out by the situation. This caused us to misunderstand one another, each believing the other didn't care about spending time together...until things hit a boiling point three days ago.

"I can see *you* getting cranky, but it's quite a surprise to hear even Rae got like that," Lene said.

"Excuse me? I do not get cranky."

"If you say so. You can be rather blunt when expressing your qualms, though."

"That's not... Well... Okay, I suppose you're right." She had me there. I was not one to mince my words, and that was a fact. There weren't many who understood me as well as Lene. Perhaps Rae and my father, but that was it.

"On the other hand, Rae isn't one to openly show how she feels," Lene said.

"The way she expresses her affection for you may make her seem unreserved, but I get the impression that's all calculated."

"Really?" I said, uncertain. It was my opinion that her fawning over me was *made* to look calculated to hide how much she truly adored me, as strange as that sounded. But I did agree on Rae not being one to openly show her true self. "But what happened this time is all Rae's fault! I heard from Lilly herself that Rae gave her *her first*, if you'd believe it."

"Whaaaaaat?!" Naturally, this news came as a surprise to Lene. She and I were both on the conservative side when it came to sexual mores. Personally, I believed one only ever gave their first experience to the one they married. "Is that true?" Lene asked. "I mean, I find that a little hard to believe..."

"I asked Rae and she denied it. But do you really think that Lilly would lie?"

"Erm, well... I don't really know Miss Lilly myself, so I can't comment there."

Come to think of it, Lene and Lilly had only met at what was to be my public execution, and that was when Lilly was Alter too. They were hardly acquainted.

"Well, for what it's worth, I do not think Lilly is someone who would lie. She's a pious follower of the Spiritual Church," I said. The Spiritual Church forbade

deceit, and it was hard to think Lilly would break its tenets.

"But Rae denied the claim, right?" Lene asked.

"She tried to, yes."

"Then don't you think there might be some misunderstanding in play?"

"Do you really think so? You said yourself moments ago that Rae was a woman who liked to keep secrets, didn't you?"

"That wasn't quite how I put it..." Lene frowned, unconvinced.

"Lene, I am not angry that Rae didn't keep her chastity. I could find it in me to forgive her for sleeping with Lilly. But I cannot forgive her for keeping me in the dark and lying about it. Such behavior is unacceptable."

"All right, I understand how you feel on the matter. Anyone would be hurt if their significant other lied to them."

Rae once told me she came from another world. That being the case, it wouldn't be strange for her values regarding sex mores to be different from mine. I was willing to overlook some of her more eccentric beliefs—after all, it wasn't even all that uncommon for nobles to have to make compromises to respect the culture of foreign dignitaries. But I could not overlook her lying about her actions.

"That being said, I still think there's some misunderstanding at play here," Lene said. "But let's keep things moving along for now. As things stand, what do you want to do, Miss Claire?"

"...I'd like to make up with her, I suppose," I muttered in a tiny voice. "I got angry at her because of what the lie was about, but I do think I overreacted. If she, of all people, lied to me, then she must have had a good reason. Or maybe she just didn't want to hurt me."

I loathed lies, but as someone who was intimately familiar with the politics of noble society, I knew that lying could be necessary at times. The fact that Rae felt she needed to lie about her fidelity did hurt me, but now that I was calmer, I understood she might not have had any ill intent.

"Are you going to apologize, then?" Lene asked.

"I already did. But she didn't accept my apology."

"Huh? Wait, Rae didn't accept your apology?" she said incredulously. I expected such a reaction.

It was crude to sing one's own praises, but Rae was—beyond any doubt—head over heels for me. We'd had arguments before, but Rae was almost always the one to fold first, and she always accepted my apologies. And yet, she'd been cross with me for the past three days.

At first, I was livid she would dare take such an attitude when *she* had been the unfaithful one. But by the second day, I realized she meant it. We'd never been this distant with each other for more than a day. On day three, my worry peaked, and I hurriedly made Lene take time out of her busy schedule to talk with me. That brought us to the present moment.

"What do I do, Lene? What if Rae leaves me?"

"That'll never happen, don't worry."

"But—"

"Not even if hell were to freeze over and pigs were to fly," she asserted. "Miss Claire, I understand you're worried, but this is Rae we're talking about. Do you really think she would leave you? After all the devotion she's shown you?"

"...No." I knew better than anyone how deep Rae's love and loyalty ran. Even if she had made a slip in judgment with Lilly, I doubted she would ever forsake me. "But then why won't she forgive me?"

"That, I don't know. But, well..."

"Yes? Do you have an idea or something?"

"I suppose you could call it that..." Lene thoughtfully closed her eyes, her expression shifting as she tried to recall something. Eventually, she opened her eyes and said, "There is this one thing I've heard from Rae that you could try."

"What is it? Tell me."

"It's a bit difficult for me to fully grasp, but *apparently* it's the highest form of respect one can show a significant other."

"That's perfect! You simply must tell me what this is, Lene!" I felt elated, like I was seeing storm clouds give way to rays of sunshine.

Lene frowned and said, "Oh, I don't know... This might be a bit too much for you."

"Nonsense. If it means Rae and I can make amends, then I'm willing to do anything."

"...If you say so. So, it's a little something like this..." She drew close for some reason, then whispered in my ear.

"Whaaaat?!"

Her suggestion was nonsensical—no, downright lunacy! And yet...

"...I'm home," I heard Rae say as she returned. Her tone was stiff, evidence she was still displeased with me. It made me sad to have things be like this between us. But that was exactly why I was now going to such lengths to fix things.

"Welcome back, Rae."

"...I'm tired, so I think I'll hit the sack now...wh-wh-what?!" She took one glance at me in the kitchen and went wide-eyed. Understandably so. The way I looked right now was as shameless as could be. "M-M-Mah, M-M-Miss Claire?!"

"Th-this is a token of my appreciation for all you do. Please, forgive me already, Rae."

"Wh-wh-whuh..."

I had never, ever seen her blush this hard. But who could blame her? I was wearing a frilly apron (handmade by Lene) with only underwear underneath.

"I-I believe this is called a 'naked apron'? I've been told this is the highest display of affection one can give their significant other. You'll have to forgive me—I kept my underwear on, as I was a bit too embarrassed to attempt this fully nude."

"W-w-wait, hold on. What's going—"

"Oh, right! There's something you have to say when you wear this, isn't there? Welcome back, dear. Would you like to cook dinner? Would you like to prepare a bath? Or..."

"Isn't that backward? Wait, no, that's not what's important here! Why are—"

"O-or would you like m-m-me...?"

Rae dropped to the floor, clutching her head.

H-huh?

"Who put you up to this? Wait, no, I already know... It was Lene, wasn't it?"

"...It was. She told me to do this after I told her I wanted to make amends with you. Did I do it wrong?"

"You did so many things wrong, but—"

"I knew it. I shouldn't have even tried."

"No, this was wonderful, Miss Claire." She got up to her feet and slapped her cheeks, as if to smack some sense back into herself. "That Lene, just what was she thinking... No, wait, I should be thanking her... Yes, thank you, Lene, wherever you are."

"Er, Rae?"

"I'm sorry for sulking like a child, Miss Claire. Your feelings have reached me."

"Th-then you'll forgive me?"

"Of course! How could I not when you've gone so far?! Thank you so much! Thank you so so much! I'm so lucky to be alive! Thank you, God! Thank you, Spirit God!"

"R-Rae?" I was a bit bewildered by her sudden elation.

She hugged me gently, our first physical contact in three days. All at once, I felt at ease. Oh, Rae. You've come back to me.

"O-okay then, I'll start preparing dinner now," I said bashfully. "That's what this apron is for, after all, ha ha."

"No, wait. Go change, Miss Claire."



"Huh? Why? Are you already tired of this look?"

"Not at all, but that look is purely for aesthetic purposes. If you're going to actually cook, then you need to wear real clothes. I'd hate for cooking oil to mar your perfect porcelain skin."

"I, er, I see."

I didn't quite get it, but I obeyed, as Rae was the expert on the matter. That is, if one could even be an expert on whatever this was. Genuinely, what was all this? At any rate, I was glad I'd caught her making such an absurd face.

From there on, whenever the two of us fought or I had a request to make of her, I would pull out my new trump card, the "naked apron." It continued to have a dramatic effect, bringing an end to even our worst quarrels. The embarrassment I had to endure was always great, but seeing Rae so happy made my wariness fade. Unfortunately, there came a point where my wariness faded too far...

"I'm home, Miss Claire."

"Welcome back, dear. Would you like to cook dinner? Would you like to prepare a bath? Or..."

I welcomed Rae home like I often did...but that day, she was not alone.

"...Claire. What is the meaning of this?"

"F-Father?!"

My father, Dole, was with her. They had run into one another on their way home, so he decided to drop by and say hello. I screamed out of sheer embarrassment, ran to the bedroom, and changed.

From that day onward I never brought out the "naked apron" again.

Incidentally, Rae was so shocked that I stopped doing the "naked apron" that she tried doing it for me instead, one day. By coincidence, I happened to have brought Misha home as a guest that day.

"...Disgusting." Misha looked at Rae with a gaze as cold as ice. I had a feeling this memory would keep Rae up at night for a very, very long time.

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"Um, Mama Claire?"

"Mother Claire, there's something we want to know."

"Yes. May. Aleah?"
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Sometime later, after Rae and I adopted May and Aleah, I told the two of them about my fight with Rae. Of course, I omitted the "naked apron" part.

"What was it you two were fighting over after all? Was it a misunderstanding?"

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"Did Mother Rae not keep her chastity?"
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"W-wait, do you two even know what that word means?" I asked.

"Of course."

"How old do you think we are?"

"Uhhh..."

With them being orphaned, I did not know their exact age. But they should have been around four or five. "Chastity" was certainly not a word that should be in their vocabulary.

"Mama Claire, tell us what happened."

"Hurry up and tell us!"

"W-well..." I felt cold sweat form on my brow. "O-okay, it was a misunderstanding. Just a small one, though."

"What was the misunderstanding?"

"Tell us!"

"O-oh, I don't see why we need to talk about it. It's really not that interesting..."

"TellII ussss!" they nagged.

"...It's really nothing, though." Reluctantly, I began to recount the story.

"I-I'll be going then, Rae, Miss Claire. Please take good care of the children."

"Of course."

"We will wish you safe travels."

A few days after we took May and Aleah under our wing, Lilly embarked on her pilgrimage of atonement. Rae and I went to the checkpoint to see her off. My father was watching May and Aleah in our absence, though I'm sure they wanted to see Lilly off as well.

"Oh, right. Before you go, there's this misunderstanding I want us to clear up," Rae said.

"Wh-what misunderstanding?" Lilly asked.

"You said something about me giving you my first. Miss Claire and I got into a big fight as a result—although something good did eventually come out of it."



"You don't need to go into *that* much detail," I chided Rae, covering her mouth. "And you needn't make excuses for me, Lilly. Even if Rae did give you her chastity, I understand that the one she loves is me, and I will never doubt that again."

"Wh-what? R-Rae's chastity? What are you talking about?!"

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

The three of us all gave one another looks.

"Is that not what happened?" I asked. "You said you received Rae's first."

"Whaaat?! I-I said no such thing!" Lilly exclaimed.

"Huh?" Sensing this didn't bode well for me, I said, "Please try to remember. It was a few days after the revolution took place. To celebrate you being released from custody, we went together to a café with sweets."

"I-I remember that, yes. You bought me strawberry daifuku, didn't you?"

"I did. It was then you told me that Rae gave you her first. You even asked if I was okay with it."

"...Oh, ohhhh!" Lilly exclaimed with horror.

"I-Is something the matter?" I asked.

"M-Miss Claire, I am so sorry. It seems there's been a terrible misunderstanding."

"...Pardon?" Oh no...

"The first I was referring to was not Rae's chastity but her first handmade strawberry daifuku."

"Her...first handmade strawberry daifuku?" I repeated the words in a half daze.

"Ohhhhhh!" Rae exclaimed, as though just remembering something. "That was around the time we rounded up those corrupt nobles, wasn't it? I'd been

wanting to make strawberry daifuku ever since our holiday, so I made some while Miss Claire was out and had Miss Lilly taste-test them for me."

"I-I'm quite particular about my strawberry daifuku, you see," Lilly said.

I wanted so very much to crawl into a hole at that moment. "S-so, I misunderstood what Lilly meant?"

"It would appear so," Rae said.

"I-I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry! This is all my fault for not articulating myself well!" Lilly said.

Wait, then I had worn that shameless outfit for nothing? "...Ack."

"Miss Claire?!" Rae exclaimed.

"Eeek?! Her eyes are rolling back in her head! Rae, quick, use your healing magic!" Lilly shouted. "...W-wait, could this actually be my chance to do something with Rae behind Miss Claire's back?! Rae, let's—"

"No chance," Rae said.

"A-aww... H-how about a farewell kiss, at least?"

"Nope."

Lilly clicked her tongue. "Prude. Would it kill you to at least toss me a bone?"

"M-Miss Lilly?"

"Ah! N-no, that wasn't intentional! I didn't mean to say that!"

The two of them shouted this and that, but I was too far gone to pay any mind. In my daze, I swore to myself that I would always ask for clarification before leaping to conclusions from here on out.

Incidentally, when I told May and Aleah about all this...

"Oh, Mama Claire..."

"You can be a bit silly sometimes, Mother Claire."

I certainly couldn't argue with that!

Afterword

T HANK YOU for purchasing Volume 3 of *She's so Cheeky for a Commoner*! This is the author, Inori. Did you enjoy this book? I sure hope you did.

This marks the final volume of the spin-off series. There are no plans to cover the second part of *I'm in Love with the Villainess* (the Nur Empire arc) from Claire's perspective. I know there are some who were looking forward to such a thing, but I ask for your understanding.

By the time this book is published, the *I'm in Love with the Villainess* anime adaptation should be airing. Have you heard of it yet? It seems the anime staff are hard at work on making the best anime possible. Of course, as the author, I will be doing what I can to contribute as well. I hope you're looking forward to seeing Rae and Claire brought to life just as much as I am.

I'd like to end with some acknowledgments, as has become tradition.

To Nakamura of GL Bunko: Thank you for allowing me to see *She's so Cheeky for a Commoner* to its completion, and thank you for all your help over the years. We've finally made it to an anime adaptation. None of this would have been possible if you hadn't taken me under your wing all that time ago. Thank you.

To Hanagata: As always, thank you for providing such wonderful illustrations for the series. The characters you breathed life into with your art will soon finally move on their own in the anime adaptation. Thank you for all you've done.

To my partner, Aki: I'm sure the two of us will be emotionally watching the anime around the time this volume comes out. I'm sure there will be tears. It was your support that allowed me to make it this far. Thank you, truly. Please be there to support me from here on out as well.

Last but not least, to you, who purchased this book: I offer you my deepest gratitude. Thank you for everything.

And with that, I bid you farewell.

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—INORI, OCTOBER 15TH, 2022



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